

**THE GROTESQUE IN THE WORKS
OF BRUNO JASIEŃSKI**

by

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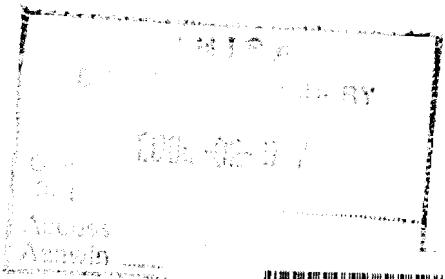
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Slavic philology; Polish literature; Russian literature; Twentieth century; History and literary criticism; Bruno Jasieński; the grotesque; avant-garde; Futurism; socialist realism; poetry; satire; apocalyptic literature; Utopian literature.

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I declare that the thesis '**The Grotesque in the Works of Bruno Jasieński**' is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



30 November 1998

(Mrs A A Krzychylkiewicz)

ABSTRACT

The chief objective of this study is to examine the works of Bruno Jasieński in order to show that he used the grotesque throughout his creative career as the most effective artistic method of highlighting issues he deemed important, as well as a means of disguising his personal view of the world and its people. The study consists of two parts: Part I is devoted to a brief survey of the development of the grotesque, with particular emphasis on the relationship between grotesque art and those artistic movements with which Bruno Jasieński associated himself, namely avant-garde and socialist realism. Part II is devoted to a close examination of the grotesque in Jasieński's major works. It opens with a summary and interpretation of Jasieński's personal views on art and its role in modern society. It then seeks to demonstrate that the essence of his grotesque method lies in the conflation of bizarre events with the scrupulous recreation of reality that insists on the accuracy of historically and geographically identifiable data. Such a method permits the artist to expose the absurdity of life in a world obsessed with appearance and material possessions. Believing that art should be the reflection of life, Jasieński saw life as a constant game between form – what it seems to be – and content – what it really is – a perception that led him to conclude that it is impossible to resolve the conflict between the world as it appears to be and its true nature. This sense of the impossibility of orientating oneself in a world dominated by ideologies intensifies during the period of Jasieński's life that he spent in the Soviet Union. The closer examination of his satiric grotesques written in Russian, apart from explicitly satiric targets, betray the author's growing apprehension that Communism, especially its Stalinist version, might be yet another deceitful façade made of promises and alluring slogans. The grotesque character of those works that focus on the opportunism and hypocrisy of politicians, also exposes the ambivalence of ideologies which while liberating some are used as the instrument of oppressing others.

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NOTES

Note on transliteration

Polish names are given in the original; Russian names are transliterated according to the Royal Geographical Society system. In the case of quotations from texts already translated, the transliteration given in the source is retained.

Titles of sources

Whenever reference is made to a primary or secondary source in a language other than English, the title of such work is given in the original followed by the translation only when it appears for the first time. Only English titles are given subsequently. For further reference the translated titles appear in brackets again in the bibliography at the end of this thesis. The titles of sources that have been translated are given only in English.

Note on translation

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from primary sources in Polish and Russian have been translated by the author. In translating works by Bruno Jasieński, special care has been taken to stay as close to the original text as possible, including repetitions, neologisms, imagery, and even punctuation. As pointed out by Balcerzan (in Jasieński 1972:LXXXI-LXXXIV) the punctuation forms an integral part of the poetic text and frequently enriches the interpretation. Although not in itself grotesque, the unconventional ‘appearance’ of the text (the presence of ciphers, as for example in the phrase ‘7-year old girl’, or ellipses, etc.) was a calculated stylistic innovation on Jasieński’s part to draw attention to the written word and give the text an innovative appeal.

References

The referencing system used is the Harvard running notes method, with footnotes and an alphabetic list of sources at the end of the thesis (cf. M. Burger *Reference Techniques*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992). Sources in Russian are given in the original and appear alphabetically in the list of sources where they would if they were transliterated.

The grotesque places all [...] assumptions in doubt. [...]

**It is relatively easy to recognise the grotesque *in* a work of art,
but quite difficult to apprehend the grotesque directly.**

Curiously, it remains elusive despite the fact that it is unchanging.

**Although it appears in various guises,
it is as independent of them as a wave is of water [...]**

(Harpham: *On the Grotesque*)

INTRODUCTION

*A rano, kiedy przyjdą i wyważą drzwi,
będę leżał na ziemi spokojny i siny, [...]
i wtedy ujrzą przedmiot, co mi z ust się zwiesza:
mój siny, napęczniały, przegryziony język,
jak wąska
nieodcyfrowana depesza.*

Morning, when they come and force the door open,
I will be lying on a floor silent and blue, [...].
They will notice an object hanging from my mouth:
my blue, swollen, bitten tongue,
like a narrow
undeciphered cablegram.

(Bruno Jasieński: *Morse*)

An assertion that ‘to examine Bruno Jasieński’s literary career is not an easy task’¹ is one of the few non-controversial statements one can make about this Futurist turned Communist, this poet, novelist, dramatist and short story writer. The task of critical evaluation of his works is complicated further by the nimbus of secrecy surrounding Jasieński’s personal life.² Little is known, particularly of the years he spent in the Soviet Union. The fact that Jasieński was arrested and executed by Stalin’s secret police in September 1937 meant that his name was intended to be forgotten, along with everything he had ever written or published. In consequence, neither the manuscripts of his works, nor any other significant source material such as diaries, notes or correspondence, were accessible to the scholarly community.

To this day the only legitimate legacy of Bruno Jasieński is that of his literary works republished after his official rehabilitation in 1956. Critical material dealing with his works is limited to a few general studies, and none of them comprehensively examines his whole

¹ Nina Kolesnikoff, *Bruno Jasieński: His Evolution from Futurism to Socialist Realism*. Waterloo, Canada (1982:123).

² A brief biography of Bruno Jasieński is appended at the end of this study.

creative output.³ Scholars prefer to confine their research to the writer's place of residence or his association with literary movements. As a rule, Polish criticism deals with Jasieński's Futuristic poetry created before 1925, while Russian scholarship emphasises his masterful application of socialist realism in his two novels written for the Soviet reader, *Человек меняет кожу* ('Man Changes His Skin') and *Заговор равнодушных* ('A Conspiracy of the Indifferent').⁴ All scholars seem to agree that growing ideologically, Jasieński renounced the avant-garde and its ideals and embraced socialist realism as his only creative method. The fact that throughout his artistic career Jasieński remained faithful to his Futuristic ideal of freedom of expression is downplayed as much as is the fact that his support for socialist realism was at best selective.⁵ Little attention is given to the fact that even though Jasieński advocated the artists' obligation to society – to uplift, to teach, and to warn – he upheld the right to imagination and bold experiment to the end of his life, as seen in his numerous articles published in the Soviet press, even as late as 1936 at the peak of the 'terror' of socialist realism.

The real difficulty in evaluating Jasieński's writing lies, however, not in the complexity of his artistic career but in the ambivalent and incongruous nature of his writing. This point applies as much to his early Futuristic poems as to his mature grotesque satires, all of which still remain like an 'undeciphered cablegram' – as his poem foretells – holding the secret to Jasieński the artist and the man. The contention underlying this study is that the grotesque is one of the most significant artistic devices chosen by Jasieński as a device which enables him to project – initially to highlight and later to conceal – his personal anxiety over the challenges facing his generation. As this study intends to show, the grotesque features consistently in Jasieński's works throughout his artistic career,

³ A brief summary of Jasieński's scholarship is included in the introduction to Part II.

⁴ Бруно Яковлевич Ясенский. 'Человек меняет кожу'. *Новый мир*, 1932(10-12) and 1933(5-10); 'Заговор равнодушных'. *Новый мир*, 1956(5-7).

⁵ See, for instance, Jasieński's speech at the Writers' Congress, Minsk, 1936 (in A. Stern, *Bruno Jasieński*. Warszawa 1969:225). Jasieński's views on art will be discussed in more detail in Part II.

regardless of the genres he chooses, and notwithstanding his political affiliation or place of residence. The grotesque unifies his whole creative output into one whole, throwing light on the artist's view of the world. The aim set for this project is thus to provide an analytical account of Bruno Jasieński's grotesque works beginning with his poetry, including the long poem *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* ('The Lay of Jakub Szela'),⁶ his early prose, namely *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* ('The Legs of Isolda Morgan')⁷ and *Palę Paryż* ('I Burn Paris'),⁸ the play *Бал манекенов* ('The Ball of the Mannequins')⁹ and the short stories: *Мужество* ('Bravery'), *Главный виновник* ('The Chief Culprit') and *Hoc* ('The Nose').¹⁰

In order to set up a theoretical framework for the survey of the grotesque in Jasieński's works, a brief summary of the development of this artistic device is given in Part I. The understanding of the grotesque applied in this study stems from reading widely on the subject rather than being based on one particular interpretation.¹¹ Almost all scholars of the grotesque agree that it represents a world that is enigmatic and incoherent, a world that is composed of elements which are inherently incompatible. There is also a consensus that the grotesque cannot be defined as representing a universe which is real or fantastic because the interplay of both these elements in a work is frequently of paramount importance to creating the necessary effect of unfathomable incongruity. A similar element of interplay applies to other categories of human experience which makes the grotesque immanently ambivalent, being neither wholly real nor fantastic, neither bad nor good, neither moral nor immoral, neither tragic nor comic. Emphasis is placed on the tendency of the grotesque to challenge established authority, to undermine the hierarchy of values

⁶ All in *Utwory poetyckie. Manifesty. Szkice*. Wrocław: 1972.

⁷ 'Nogi Izoldy Morgan' i inne utwory. Warszawa: 1966.

⁸ *Palę Paryż*. Warszawa: 1957.

⁹ 'Nogi Izoldy Morgan' i inne utwory. Warszawa: 1966.

¹⁰ 'Nogi Izoldy Morgan' i inne utwory. Warszawa: 1966; 'Hoc.' *Известия*, 1936(36-39).

¹¹ A brief summary of scholarship on the grotesque follows in the introduction to Part I.

accepted in a given epoch, and to reject its aesthetic code. In addition to this, scholars point out that the grotesque work defies unequivocal interpretation. The reader, realising that his efforts to comprehend the universe portrayed in such a work are futile, is left with the feeling of emotional discomfort.

Since Jasieński identified himself and his work with two literary trends – the avant-garde and socialist realism – the attitude of these trends towards the grotesque is briefly outlined. The concise summary of the relationship of the grotesque with the avant-garde and socialist realism leads to the conclusion that while the avant-garde embraced the grotesque as one of the most versatile modes of expression, socialist realism with its neo-classical approach to art, dismissed it completely. Socialist realists were forced strictly to obey the prescriptive rules for creative writing set out by Stalinist *apparatchiks*. Their works had to be constructive and instructive, that is, they had to set out in their works positive, edifying examples of the human contribution in the building of communism and to inspire readers to follow this path. Authoritarian socialist realism could not permit the ambivalence and incongruity on which the iconoclastic grotesque thrives.

Being one of the leading Polish Futurists, Bruno Jasieński accepted the grotesque within a framework of avant-garde artistic programmes which called for total rebellion against the moral, social and political establishment. This attitude transpires from his early theoretical writing, namely his Futuristic manifestos, reviewed at the beginning of Part II. Departing from the Futuristic position that the world ceased to be comprehensible in simple and logical terms, Jasieński rejected common-sense logic as outdated and useless in times in which the world is undergoing technological revolution and social upheaval. Jasieński also placed great emphasis on the form of the new art, believing that it must provide readers with a ‘mind-blowing’ experience. In order to shock placid provincial townsmen, he called for artists to experiment boldly with various means of expression – to rely on logical ‘somersaults’ to use his own terminology. Later, as a Soviet writer, Jasieński seems to have embraced the new political order, but, admitting to an unreserved support for the ideas underlying the doctrine of socialist literature, he blamed narrow-minded and uninformed bureaucrats for strangling any manifestation of intellectual

independence and artistic freedom. Although the element of open rebellion in his theoretical and critical pronouncements is subdued, he continued to use the grotesque in a number of his works, which had to be seen by his opponents as an act of deliberate provocation on his part.

Although in examining the grotesque in Jasieński's works the chronological sequence of their appearance was observed – the study progresses from his early poetry and ends on the analysis of his short stories – the chronology has no other significance than to provide a framework for the evolution of the targets, intensity and function that this device is ascribed by the author. In his earliest poems Jasieński directs one of his most violent attacks at the old art, especially at its decadent and pointless self-indulgence. He calls for the new art to become a part of everyday life, to be topical, to reflect the strife of the day. The grotesque is for him a device which highlights both his revulsion with Symbolism as a hallmark of the immediate past and his fascination with the new art. Almost concurrently with his aesthetic concerns, Jasieński becomes interested in the matters of everyday life. His Futuristic poetry targets the modern city populated by lonely and anonymous people, not so much lost in the labyrinth of streets as in the labyrinth of life itself. Jasieński's urban landscapes are hostile to humans, but each human being is himself hostile to another human being. The relationships between people lack compassion and love; instead, they are based on the need to dominate, whether by violating another man's rights or his body. Human tragedy is met with indifference and remains as anonymous as a victim. The world Jasieński depicts is deceptive and full of misleading appearances; expectations lead nowhere and there is no common-sense causal correlation between or explanation of events.

Many of the poems betray Jasieński's interest in social injustice. His attitude towards the downtrodden is obscured, however, by the grotesque indeterminacy which affects his portrayal of the masses, marked both by admiration and fear. One of the significant characteristics of Jasieński's grotesque is the lack of a fixed point of view and the elusive nature of truth. His concern that truth is relative received the fullest exposure in his most mature poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela* where he undertakes the revision of history on the

grounds of class consciousness. Choosing one version of an historical event, Jasieński ascribes it to the historically disadvantaged masses of Polish peasantry. In this poem, intended as a token of Jasieński's ideological commitment to the masses, the grotesque is at its most disturbing since the reader is led to believe that brutal murder may be justified by what the poet calls *sprawiedliwość dziejowa*, 'historical justice'. Because of the complex nature of *The Lay of Jakub Szela*, in this study only the motif of dance is singled out for close examination as the one which effectively represents the relativity of perception and illusory nature of human relations. Jasieński turns dance into a powerful grotesque representation of the peasants' bloody mutiny against their landlords. The grotesque, initially used by the poet as a novel and extravagant device – for instance an unusual simile or metaphor, odd personification or blasphemous rhetoric – eventually becomes Jasieński's favourite stylistic technique rendering the universe emerging from his poetry ambivalently estranged and incomprehensibly ominous.

Jasieński's first attempt at prose is associated with a short novella, *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, published during Jasieński's association with Futurism. The novella deals with the issue which was central in all Futuristic programmes, namely technological advancement and its effect on society. As was the case in his poetry, the device of the grotesque affects almost every aspect of the text. The portrayed universe is strange and threatening, human characters are devoid of essential humanness and live only by their obsessions, while machines are imbued with evil intelligence and a determination to destroy people. According to Jasieński's own introduction to *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, this work captures the moment of distress in social consciousness when people perceive machines threatening to swap places with humans. The novella shows the process of machines assuming human characteristics and people becoming soulless and emotionless automata. The moment of this vanishing of the distinction between human and mechanical categories is portrayed as particularly dangerous, causing the dissipation of traditional human values, such as compassion, respect or love. The cult of the machine, the young Futurist seems to warn, will be perilous to society if people forfeit human values and moral integrity.

A similarly strange and threatening universe is created in Jasieński's Parisian novel *I Burn Paris*, written and published in France, where he lived for four years between 1925 and 1929. The novel voices unequivocal rejection of the world as it is and marks the culmination of Jasieński's apocalyptic sentiments, underscored by the panoramic exposure of the moral degeneration and physical dilapidation of the European metropolis. The novel develops the theme of an individual, rebelling against the oppressive social system which he blames for the widespread crumbling of standards. His personal problems and his retrenchment as a manifestation of social injustice lead the chief character, the young proletarian Pierre, to obsessive hatred directed at all the inhabitants of Paris, prompting him to kill them all by contaminating the city's water conduit with microbes of bubonic plague. Based on the novel's intrinsic contention that the ends justify the means, the narrative concludes with the vision of a future proletarian city, built in the place of the evil world that has been destroyed by the plague.

The grotesque affects the style of the novel as much as it affects its universe and the portrayal of its various characters. The style of the novel is saturated with figurative devices ranging from outlandish comparisons and similes to the most elaborate metaphors. The function of the novel's poetics is to enhance the ambiguity of the universe in which nothing is what it appears to be. Although Pierre's reasoning develops logically as he undergoes a *sui-generis* metamorphosis from a victim to the avenger, the reader cannot reconcile trivial causes with the final apocalyptic destruction of Paris. The unresolved nature of the narrative perspective prevents the reader from distinguishing between the 'objective' reality, that is the one perceived by the author or the narrator and the subjective perception born in the traumatised mind of the chief character. The examination of the various aspects of the grotesque in the novel suggests that Jasieński, like his hero Pierre, resented the world, its social order and moral foundations. As the author of the novel he applies every artistic resource to justify the destruction of this world and makes room for the new better world, emulating the Biblical paradigm. However, having no sound ideological background and, evidently, little faith in people's ability to built an ideal world, the author fails to paint a vision of a future proletarian state that would be both convincing and alluring. As was the case with Jasieński's ambivalent attitude to the masses seen in his

poetry, here too one observes a striking discord between his emotional solidarity with the socially disadvantaged and his intellectual resentment of the uneducated and unsophisticated mob.

I Burn Paris is Jasieński's last work where the grotesque is used predominantly to enhance the expressiveness of the text and to stimulate the reader. Up to this moment the grotesque was for Jasieński a tool both to awaken the audience to the problems of the day and to provoke, giving him at the same time the opportunity to express his own radical dissatisfaction with the world. After his arrival in the Soviet Union in May 1929, he could officially publish his grotesque works only as satires. But the relationship of the grotesque and satire is a complex one, as critics note, and if not used cautiously, the grotesque may obscure both the message and the satiric targets in satiric grotesques. Moreover, the grotesque is both a 'magnifying glass' (Yu. Mann)¹² and a 'vault' of meaning (Harpham)¹³. As a 'magnifying glass', the grotesque highlights the problems which makes it useful for satire but as a 'vault' it harbours secrecy and conceals alternative meanings. The grotesque text may thus be an effective mask preventing the reader from ever seeing the true face of the author, that is, from ever knowing for certain what his the true intentions are. These two qualities fully apply to Jasieński's Soviet works selected for the analysis in the last chapter of this study. While the objectives of the satiric attack in each of these works are relatively easy to identify, the reader is compelled to look for the possibility of a hidden deeper meaning.

Jasieński's first work published in the Soviet Union shortly after his arrival was *The Ball of the Mannequins*, intended by its author as a comedy deriding French social democrats. The most effective grotesque in this play originates in the confusion of humans and human-like objects, that is, tailors' dummies. The virulent comment this grotesque comedy seems to make is that the similarity in shape mirrors the inner vacuity shared by its human characters and the mannequins. The universe of the play is ambivalent – fantastic

¹² 'The Magnifying Glass of Grotesque'. *Soviet Literature*. (1970(8):133-144).

¹³ *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton 1982:27.

and verifiable at the same time. Its population consists of creatures that are neither human nor inanimate marionettes. The traditional hierarchy of values is frustrated when the highest respect is given to social status and outward appearance. Language is deprived of its communicative value, instead, the play's characters develop a peculiar jargon, the linguistic simplicity of which reflects their moral and spiritual emptiness. Although the play was intended for a Soviet audience, its author deliberately fails to make an emphatic distinction between the 'evil' capitalist society and the 'good' Communists, since the jargon of the play applies to both, encouraging the reader to draw analogies. The play's overall misanthropic tonality also sanctions the assertion that human weaknesses such as thirst for power, toadying, greed, vanity, misuse of language, are universal characteristics of people – scheming politicians and competitive party officials especially.

As the action develops, the comedy assumes significance as a tragic comment on the epoch in which all the beacons of orientation have shifted to the point that it is no longer clear who merits respect and who deserves contempt. Neither appearance nor language provide reliable guidelines in human relations. Apart from its superficial comment on the hypocrisy of French democrats, this grotesque comedy illustrates the breakdown in interpersonal communication in a world that worships status and appearance and hides behind euphemisms, ideological slogans and political newspeak. Moreover, Jasieński who never made his own voice distinguishable from other voices heard in his works, here too might have used the text as a mask for his own admission to having fallen a victim of the misleading appearances and slogans which lured him to the Soviet Union and to the idea of Communism.

Jasieński, who since his early Futuristic manifestos believed that it is the artist's obligation to react to the burning issues of the day, eventually turned his attention to the matters of the totalitarian threat which dominated the political scene in the thirties. During the years 1935 and 1936 he published three short stories, apparently intended for a collection of 'unusual stories',¹⁴ with a common theme: individual versus the State and its parsimonious

¹⁴ J. Dziarnowska, *Słowo o Brunonie Jasieńskim*. Warszawa 1982:498.

needs. In all three cases the human life is lost in the name of the regime. In *Bravery* individuals, represented by young Komsomol activists, recognise the priority of the state's needs, heroically sacrificing their young lives, or so the official version wants the public to believe. The story poses a question, whether the Communist State has the right to prejudge the worth of human life on grounds of its suitability for the Party. In *The Chief Culprit* the individual fears the Fascist regime and hates its omnipotence, but is helpless in fighting it and loses his life. In *The Nose* the individual is a prominent Nazi scientist who devises ideological justification for the oppressive system to which he eventually falls victim.

The grotesque interacts with satire in all three tales, although the intensity of both the grotesque and satire changes from story to story. In *Bravery* there are only subtle hints at the absurdity of interpersonal relationships within the hierarchy of Soviet bureaucracy, while *The Chief Culprit* voices radical contempt for the menacing lunacy of military regimes. In this trilogy *The Nose* occupies a special place. The ludicrous universe of the story parallels the absurd ideological foundations of Nazism. During one of his scientific experiments, the story's chief character, a prominent Nazi scientist, undergoes an inexplicable metamorphosis – he becomes his own victim when his own nose changes its shape from 'immaculately straight' and typically German to 'huge, hooked and shamelessly' Semitic. Once this happened, all the achievements of this distinguished professor together with reputation as exemplary citizen and family man are nullified and he becomes a useless nobody that must be discarded. As there are no guidelines for the reader in respect of probable and improbable or moral and immoral, the inane logic of the narrative appeals only to the reader's own sense of right and wrong. *The Nose* supplies additional perspective on other satires discussed in this chapter, illustrating that our civilisation has lost its sense of measure and value, and that mere appearance has become the yardstick by which value is measured in the modern world.

As illustrated by his satires – all published in the Soviet Union but unanimously disregarded by Soviet criticism even after his rehabilitation – Jasieński remained critical of his generation that chose to compensate with ideologies and ideological jargon the

prevailing tendency to forsake traditional human values and the general depreciation of moral standards. The grotesque so abundantly present in Jasieński's works contests the extent and earnestness of his 'ideological growth' in the Soviet sense. Explicitly proclaiming his support for the Soviet Communist government, including its policies towards art and literature, Jasieński defied them by continuously using the grotesque as his favourite means of artistic expression. The presence of the grotesque in Jasieński's 'Soviet' works proves that he was unable to reconcile in himself the artist he was, and the 'engineer of human souls' he wanted or was expected to be.

Among Jasieński's literary works there are only two that have been omitted in this study because the understanding of the grotesque applied to the analysis of all the rest of his works does not apply to them. These are his two Soviet novels, *Man Changes his Skin* and *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent*. And although the odd examples of the grotesque device may be found in these novels, such as unusual metaphors, extravagant hyperboles or disturbing images, they do not project a typically grotesque, ominous ambivalence on the whole narrative. Considering that *Man Changes his Skin* was written soon after Jasieński's arrival in the Soviet Union, the optimistic realism of the novel may be attributed to his seeing a purpose in the collective endeavour of Soviet men in changing life, and believing that the effort of the masses would resolve not only the social but also the moral problems facing humanity. Although this belief is no longer evident in *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent*, the mode of the novel is realistic. It draws parallels between Communism and Nazism, sanctioning the same disturbing parallels as noted in his satires, but its universe is wholly confined to reality. It is only as absurd and ambivalent as life came to be. The characters of the novel are real in the ordinary way, all prone to hypocrisy and a skilful manipulation of language. In this last and unfinished novel Jasieński yet again undertakes the task of exposing the terror of the state and the unhindered militarisation of modern society irrespective of the name chosen by the political regime, but turning rather to bitter irony than to riotous grotesque. The reader thus has no doubt that this is our world, created, populated and accepted by the human race.

PART I

TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF THE GROTESQUE

[...] to understand the grotesque is to cease to regard it as grotesque.

(Harpham: *On the Grotesque*)

INTRODUCTION

It is our century's view that, as one scholar puts it, the grotesque is 'a perennial strain in the human imagination' and as such 'it antedates all theories and all movements' (Mc Elroy 1989:182).¹ The need to understand the grotesque and its impact on the development of art became particularly evident in the second half of the twentieth century. A number of influential works on the grotesque appeared in different countries over a period of some ten years beginning with the 1957 publication of Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*.² An intuitive recognition of grotesque work is followed by a comparative study of similar elements in other works, allowing Kayser to conclude that

the grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence. (1981:37)

In Kayser's words, the grotesque is determined by 'the fusion of realms, which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of "natural" size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order', while the forces responsible for the estrangement of the world remain unknown: 'the incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal' – the ghostly cosmic "It". However, Kayser's final interpretation of the grotesque as 'an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspect of the world' (both *ibid.*:185) unnecessarily limits all irrational forces to those originating from the paranormal and the supernatural.

¹ *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. New York, 1989. Similar views are expressed in numerous other works, for instance Harpham (1982), whose opinion is based on the analyses of paintings and carvings found in palaeolithic caves.

² For the purpose of this study I have used: W. Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. New York, 1981.

Although, Kayser's theory has been criticised for its insistence on the uncanny and ominous character of the grotesque, and its 'threatening, frightful, and abysmal qualities' (ibid.:170), his study still remains one of the cornerstones for the student of the grotesque, mainly because of the author's vast knowledge and the lucid, down-to-earth presentation of his argument. As for his requirement for supernatural intervention to make the estrangement possible, he himself feels trapped occasionally. This may be detected especially in the last chapter 'The Grotesque in the Twentieth Century', when confronting the 'verbal grotesque' in poetry by Morgenstern (ibid.:150), the 'dreamlike' world of Franz Kafka (ibid.:147), and the 'excessively real' world of Thomas Mann (ibid.:158).

Looking at other aspects of the grotesque, a number of critical studies provide almost unlimited opportunities for innovative approaches to its understanding. The work of Jennings, Clayborough and Bakhtin³ provide valuable observations on different manifestations of the grotesque in a number of literary works. While Kayser based his analysis of the grotesque on its terrifying aspect, Bakhtin focused on the comic, introducing the concept of the carnival and its liberating laughter. In Bakhtin's words, carnival is 'past millennia's way of sensing the world as one great communal performance' (1984a:160). Bakhtin associates the carnival with the spirit of freedom and laughter, believing that it helped people to liberate themselves from the seriousness of officialdom (1984b:90). An interesting perspective on Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and carnival is presented by Booker and Juraga in their book *Bakhtin, Stalin and Modern Russian Fiction*.⁴ One of their worthwhile suggestions is that Bakhtin used the work of Rabelais as a disguise for his comment on Stalin and his policies. Indeed, in the way Bakhtin described the medieval world there is more than one hint to substantiate such an

³ L. B. Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose*. Berkeley, 1963; A. Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Oxford, 1965; M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, 1984a, and *Творчество Франсуа Рабле* ('Rabelais and His World'). Bloomington, 1965. In this study, the reference is made to *Rabelais and his World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, 1984b.

⁴ Westport, 1995.

interpretation. Clayborough, approaching the topic from a Jungian perspective, focuses on perception and its reproduction in the work of art. In his interpretation, the grotesque work is a medium through which the author illuminates the readers' own involuntary reaction to certain phenomena or circumstances. Where the grotesque is applied deliberately, Clayborough takes it as a kind of rebellion against systematic thoughts, suggesting an emotional attitude on the part of the creator (1965:68).

Studies of the grotesque proliferated in subsequent years. The impressive body of literature available on the subject is thoroughly reviewed in *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* by Frances Barasch.⁵ This work also traces the evolution of the meaning and applications of the term 'grotesque'. The summary of the six centuries-long history of the term given in Barasch's book makes a credible case for the profound influence the grotesque always had on art. Discussing more recent uses of the grotesque, which Barasch invariably associates with theatre, her study leads to the conclusion that both traditional and modern forms have certain common characteristics, 'for the artists of different ages, instinctively or consciously, expressed in fantasies of mixed humour and fear, the common perception that the total human experience is beyond logical ordering' (1971:164).

Much more modest in its scope, but nevertheless important for understanding the *modus operandi* of the grotesque is a brief study *The Grotesque* by Philip Thomson.⁶ The comparative approach chosen for his study allows Thomson to elucidate various aspects of the grotesque through its juxtaposition to other related terms and modes, such as absurd, bizarre, macabre, caricature and comic. His attempt to formulate his own definition of the grotesque focuses on four concepts: disharmony, a mixture of both the comic and the terrifying being responsible for the unresolved nature of the grotesque, extravagance and exaggeration, and abnormality. The first of these concepts – disharmony – may affect the work of art itself, it impacts on the reaction the work evokes and, speculatively, it reflects 'the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist'

⁵ Paris and The Hague, 1971.

⁶ London, 1972.

(ibid.:20). The most distinctive quality of the grotesque, in his opinion, is 'the unresolved clash of incompatibilities in work and response' to it, together with 'the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque' (ibid.:27). Among the important features distinguishing the grotesque from related modes, Thomson singles out the strong emotional involvement of the reader of a grotesque work.

A more recent study, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, takes the grotesque for 'a protean idea that is capable of assuming a multitude of forms' (1982:xv). Striving to define the character of the phenomenon of the grotesque, Harpham explores the effect it had on art from the conscious beginnings of humankind. The scholar attributes the grotesqueness 'not so much to the specific contents of the image [but rather to] the fact that it refuses to be taken in whole' (ibid.:6). He persistently emphasises that the grotesque inevitably introduces into a work of art an element of clash between its different aspects ('clash between "virtuous" limitations of form and rebellious content' [ibid.:7]). For Harpham the grotesque is a 'species of confusion', which is incidently, but most appropriately, conveyed by the etymology of the very term, which he repeats after Clayborough: 'The Latin form of *grotta* is probably *crypta* ("crypt"), which in turn derives from the Greek *Kρύπτη*, a vault; one of the cognates is *Kρύπτειν*, to hide. *Grotesque*, then, gathers into itself suggestions of the underground, of burial, and of secrecy' (ibid.:27). Although Harpham is criticised for running the 'serious risk of making indeterminacy into a fetish' (Mc Elroy 1989:7), the seminal value of his study lies in its discussion of circumstances which may not be paramount but which certainly create a congenial atmosphere for the grotesque.

While Harpham's study ponders the general and supra-temporal characteristics of the grotesque, other scholars prefer to formulate their understanding of the grotesque in close relation to specific historical circumstances and the aesthetic and philosophical consciousness at particular times, referring to concrete objects of art, whether they are paintings, architecture or literary works. In the context of this thesis one of the more recent books on the subject of the grotesque is particularly interesting: *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* by Bernard Mc Elroy (1989). The central assumption of Mc Elroy's

study stands in marked contradiction to Kayser's work, for Kayser believes that the grotesque results from the intervention of mysterious supernatural forces while Mc Elroy is of the firm opinion, that in the modern world, the grotesque is rooted in human consciousness.

CHAPTER I

ABOUT THE GROTESQUE: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The grotesque depends on a number of subjective factors, such as the capacity to perceive, but also to express, people's different cultural and philosophical backgrounds, as well as each person's different emotional response to the surrounding world. That is why the definition of the grotesque stumbles every time we want finally to formulate it. To overcome this difficulty, critics, attempting to define the 'jellyfish nature' of the grotesque, to use Harpham's expression, almost always start by giving an historical perspective of the understanding of the concept and phenomenon itself. Even a brief outline of the historical development of the concept of the grotesque helps to understand the nature of this elusive yet ever-present phenomenon, and to grasp the important role the grotesque plays in reflecting the complexities of our modern world. Paying respect to this tried method, we shall focus on the evolution of the term, its meaning and its function, with the intention of showing certain patterns in the application of the term and in the progression of the critical cognisance of the grotesque since its emergence as an aesthetic category. We shall see that the development of the grotesque was never a linear process,¹ while its criticism oscillated between negative and positive signs, making the grotesque dominant or subordinate in accordance with a given epoch's prevailing concept of art and its relation to life.² Moreover, we shall see that the grotesque was never an indifferent mode of artistic expression. While some accepted it as a profound tool in the artistic portrayal of the

¹ See W. Bolecki, *Pre-teksty i teksty. Z zagadnień związków międzytekstowych w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*. Warszawa, 1991. Bolecki illustrates this aspect on the example of modernism which successfully employed ancient mythical as well as Renaissance types of the grotesque, adding to it its own colouring (1991:115-145). His summary of modernistic grotesque is related at the end of this chapter.

² As the scholar of the grotesque put it: 'it is up to the culture to provide the conventions and assumptions that determine its particular forms (logic, common sense dictates its recognition): culture does it by establishing conditions of order and coherence, especially by specifying which categories are logically or generically incompatible with others (Harpaham 1982:xx).

complex world, others found it to be a figment of sick imagination, and the history of art proves that both points of view coexisted throughout all times.

The existence of the grotesque as an aesthetic category dates back to the origins of the term, although it has been successfully used retrospectively (see footnote 4 below). The term 'grotesque' was coined in Italy towards the end of the fifteenth century in relation to certain ancient ornaments discovered in the *grottos* or caves of Rome (Barasch 1971:20). An unusual compilation of human and animal body parts, intertwined with one another and with plant motifs characterised these ornaments.³ Their essence was the joining together of elements belonging to different realms. The newly created whole belonged to neither of these realms and was thus perceived as an aberration of nature, as a negation of what was considered the natural order. The method was straightforward; it relied on the disintegration of natural entities and on synthesising some of their elements according to a novel principle of unrestrained freedom. This unusual yet simple technique gave birth not only to a new whole but, simultaneously, it was also creating a qualitatively new value and a new sense of 'intriguing' beauty. The ornamental value of this rediscovered technique was noted immediately, primarily by painters (Rafael and Luca Signorelli among others [Clayborough 1965:2]) who imitated these fantastic, often playful compilations of elements in their art, not only attesting to the appeal of the grotesque art, but also identifying it with artistic inventiveness and creativity.

The fact that the grotesque was first associated with ancient art invited critics to look for grotesque images in antiquity. Summarising the research in this field, Bolecki writes that the basic element of the grotesque – the image of a creature consisting of human and animal parts – had already appeared 3000 years BC in the art of Mesopotamia, Egypt and India. Later it became a characteristic element in Chinese art and Greek mythology, where it was known under many generic names, such as Minotaur, Midas, Daphne, Akteon, Gorgona-Medusa (1991:118). Continuing his survey of the oldest grotesque images,

³ The discoveries leading to the establishment of the term 'grotesque' are presented in a number of studies, for instance, Barasch 1971; Harpham 1982.

Bolecki names *hybrids* (attributing the invention of the term to Lukian, first century BC). Hybrids, he explains, were either people with elements taken from animals (the Minotaur, Midas), or animals featuring elements of the human body (the Sphinx would be the most obvious example), or even parts of different animals compiled anew into one creature (illustrated by the image of Pegasus having the body of a horse and the wings of a bird). The history of ancient art is full of hybrids consisting of human body parts combined with elements of fish, cats, birds and bulls, grouped together according to the principle of the method by which they were created. The intended meaning of these images remains obscure to us today. Usually they are perceived as symbols of ancient art, and are seldom associated with the grotesque, precisely because they have lost their intended significance for us. The technique of creating such hybrids is easier to understand than to decode the motivations of their creators. The method itself was described by Horace in his *Ars Poetica*:

[...] Suppose, some painter, for a whim, should trace
 A horse's neck with human head and face,
 And limbs from various animals expressed
 In plumage of as various hues invest,
 So that the same fantastic piece may show
 A fair maid upwards, a foul fish below, —
 Were you admitted to the motley sight,
 Methinks you'd laugh, my friend, and well you might.
 Yet not less strange, my Pisos, to the ear
 Of sober sense that poem must appear,
 Which deals in shapes extravagant and vain,
 Wild as the phantoms of a feverish brain;
 Where, no two members to one whole referred,
 All is *grotesque*,⁴ incongruous, and absurd.

⁴ Emphasis added; the fragment is quoted as it appears in Muller Cooke, 'The Grotesque in Andrej Belyj's *Moscow Novels*'. Unpublished, 1982:2. What Horace conveyed in an extended phrase, the translator captures with a modern word 'grotesque; compare: *scimus, et hanc ueniam petimusue damusque uicissim; / sed non ut placidis coeant immitia, non ut / serpentes auibus geminentur, tigribus agni* (verses 11-13). See: Horace, *Satires, Epistles and 'Ars Poetica'*. Cambridge, 1978:450-451. See also Brink, *Horace on Poetry*. Cambridge, 1971:85-88. The use of the term 'grotesque' by the translator proves both its semantic potential and its versatility. Harpham put it in the following way: 'As an adjective [grotesque] has no descriptive value; its sole function is to represent a condition of overcrowding or contradiction in the place where the modifier should be. This place can never be occupied by any other single adjective but only by a number of adjectives not normally found together' (1982:3).

We are obliged to note, though, that Horace's intention was not to praise but to denounce the incongruous art, for he did not share the perception of the world which justified it. For the classicist Horace such 'extravagant' images are 'vain' and 'wild phantoms' of a 'feverish brain' and while they serve no purpose, are proof of 'lack of art'. Horace puts forward his own understanding of what art should be – *simplex et unum* [verse 23]. As a classical poet's satiric comment on some outlandish paintings and poems created by his contemporaries who did not respond to the requirements of simplicity and unity, *Ars Poetica* proves at the same time that classical artists were aware of limits inscribed in the classical canon and were perpetually defying them. Classical art, close to Horace's heart, focused on the orderly world where strict segregation and classification of the observed phenomena were possible. Named and arranged in a coherent logical system they reflected the logical world and promoted a rational response, inspiring artistic experience, categorised as classical. In these terms classical art may be associated with concepts such as 'archetypal', 'decisive', 'definitive', 'reliable', 'trustworthy', and 'sanctioned'. That is why Horace saw the incongruous images created by some of his contemporary artists as mere imperfections and lack of artistic talent on their behalf. However, these artists found classical art too confining and explored the *alternative* point of view. By creating 'extravagant' images, such artists responded to the 'other' experience of life – chaos, uncertainty and ambiguity. This specific response was reflected then, as much as it is today, in the feeling of fear and confusion, in evoking ambivalent response, giving rise to and creating an idiosyncratic order of the grotesque art. Mc Elroy is thus right in saying that although it is impossible precisely to establish the meaning these images had for their creators, we are led to believe that they were of considerable significance, for even to a modern eye they carry 'the suggestion of the frightful, summoning up the world of irrational fear or nightmare in which such creatures might exist' (1989:183).

In outlining the history of the grotesque one comes across the images of Scyllas, centaurs and such monsters again in medieval art. But when in ancient times they might have been alluding to divine forces, remaining beyond the reach of the human mind, medieval artists used them as personifications of evil, frequently in accordance with a specific allegoric code to represent particular sins relevant to Christian philosophy. It is conceivable that in

the Middle Ages the fear of the unknown was exploited by the Church hierarchy's official culture. But, as researchers point out, these images of death, devils, and other monsters inscribed in the medieval version of Christianity were frequently rendered ludicrous and their actual effect was to subvert the authority of the Church. Through representing these horrifying and deformed ogre images as laughable, people were familiarising their fear of the unknown (Bolecki 1991:109). The anti-totalitarian rebellion through grotesque laughter, which allowed the medieval man to cope with the imposition of authority whether that of the Church or the state, is discussed in detail by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, especially in Chapter I, 'Rabelais in the History of Laughter'.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century European art departed from the authoritarian medieval philosophy of asceticism and the dominance of spiritual over temporal aspects of existence, refocusing on the more tangible experience of life in a movement known as the Renaissance. With it the perception of the world changed dramatically. This new approach encouraged individualism and freedom of thought, frequently becoming instrumental in rejecting dogmatic Christian philosophy. Inquiry into the complex nature of the world was promoted in sciences and widely reflected in arts. The discovery of grotesque murals came at the right time, so to speak. Their patterns released artistic inventiveness, and although people viewed the outlandish frescos 'as falsehoods', as reported by Vitruvius (Harpham 1982:26), they accepted them as an embodiment of freedom.

The rediscovery of the grotesque inevitably prompted issues in regard to art versus nature. There is no question that the phenomena associated then with the grotesque had to be perceived as 'unnatural', as the grotesque frescos did not resemble anything one could see in nature. But already towards the end of the sixteenth century understanding of grotesque art was modified and the grotesque was seen not only in terms of the negation of physical reality, but also in terms of its distortion. Commenting on this, critics⁵ usually illustrate

⁵ Among others: Clayborough 1965:12, Kayser 1981:30, L. Sokół, *Groteska w teatrze S. I. Witkiewicza*, Ossolineum, 1973:11.

their point by recalling the grotesque caricatures of the French artist Callot (1592-1635), who occasionally sketched beggars, sick and deformed people, or characters from the *commedia dell'arte*. Although there is no consensus⁶ among the critics, regarding the extent to which Callot's art was invention, deformation, or even an illustration of life, they unanimously admit that Callot's drawings and paintings captured the essence of the grotesque more than adequately. For a student of the modern grotesque Callot's caricatures are the bizarre fusion of human and nonhuman elements, but as a whole they always retain the shape and principal attributes of the human body. His drawings and sketches mark a new direction in the development of modern grotesque art, that which is centred on the human body and its relation to the inner qualities of a human being. Since Callot, critics say, the term 'grotesque' not only spread throughout the European continent, but it began its remarkable critical career (Bolecki 1989:111).

Soon grotesque images began to be recognised in literary portrayal in works by writers such as Villon, Rabelais, Cervantes and Shakespeare, thus shifting the concept of the grotesque 'beyond the sphere of decorative art' (Clayborough 1965:12) into criticism (see Barasch 1971:chsIV-VII). Clayborough finds one of the first examples of the use of the term in literature in François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1535). Working towards his own understanding of the grotesque, Clayborough observes that in literature it was initially associated with phenomena synonymous with the strange, the monstrous and the bizarre. He notes, however, that neither the function nor the potential of the grotesque was fully comprehended at that time. For many years the grotesque continued to be seen as a meaningless, playful compilation of various, naturally incompatible, elements (see also Harpham 1982:64) while the term itself was used synonymously with 'funny', 'bizarre', 'fantastic', 'extravagant' and 'capricious'. As an artistic mode, its use

⁶ To note these contradictory views, we may mention, for instance, Clayborough: 'Callot's figures were a distortion of physical reality' (1965:12), and Bolecki's view that these are 'fantastic monsters having no semblance to nature' (1989:111). Describing some of Callot's illustrations to the *commedia*, Kayser notes that the distortions which appear in Callot's sketches 'are by no means inventions of the artist' (1981:39).

was restricted to '*les vaudevilles, les rondeaux, les épigrammes, et les ouvrages comiques*' (Clayborough 1965:3-4).

The tolerant attitude to the grotesque lasted until the first half of the eighteenth century, when the dominance of the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism enforced aesthetics which relied on the classical sense of beauty, namely proportion and unity. As already noted, because of its very cryptic and 'impure' nature, grotesque art was always poles apart from those classical principles, so it is no surprise that neo-classicists barely tolerated it, permitting its application only in the visual arts, where it was equated with caricature. The grotesque acquired negative connotations⁷ and signified everything that was considered deformed, macabre, ugly, unnatural, ridiculous and absurd, unless used strictly as a technical term in criticism.

The attitude towards the grotesque changed again during the Romantic period when, along with the Gothic,⁸ it became one of the features, distinguishing this artistic current. The Romantic artists embraced the grotesque as an accepted, and even desired element in their works, employing it to emphasise their individuality, their liberation from the confines imposed by the previous epoch, but also to underline their isolation from the rest of the world. The grotesque in the works of Romantics aimed to turn the reader's attention to the inexplicable and rationally incomprehensible world, the existence of which Romantic art had acknowledged. Negative connotations associated with the term in the previous

⁷ For instance, Barasch speaks of the 'monstrous', 'barbaric' and even 'immoral' as synonyms for the grotesque in the framework of the eighteenth- century aesthetic code (1971:113-114).

⁸ The origins of the term go back to the Middle Ages, when it was fashionable to adorn monumental Gothic buildings with the images of chimeras, gargoyles, dragons and so on. Together with the gloomy architecture, such decorations bolstered the outlandishly mysterious atmosphere of these Gothic structures. The relation of Gothic to the grotesque is not clearly defined. Harpham, for instance, considers Gothic to be 'contained within fixities of time and place, form and function: definable architectural style, coherent symbolic significance, clear origin and terminus, and a limited number of instances', while 'none of these helpful limitations applies to the grotesque' (1982:xvii). Mc Elroy dismisses the issue as 'hair-splitting', but acknowledges that the concept is one of those related to but 'presumably, not synonymous with grotesque' (1989:2). Romantics adopted Gothic as a genre which accorded well with their predilection for mystery.

epoch were replaced by new positive ones, linking the grotesque with imaginative writing and making it synonymous with expressions such as 'full of fantasy', 'eccentric', 'fantastic', 'peculiar', and 'unusual'. The Romantic convention made way for the grotesque, giving artists a right to absolute creative freedom and the liberation of art from former restrictions and conventions, including the demands of generic purity.⁹ Even here grotesque art benefited: the merging of tragedy and comedy became permissible, allowing them both to be components of the same context.¹⁰ This apparent confusion as to where the tears end and the laughter begins was unthinkable for classicists, whose genre of tragicomedy allowed them to use these elements only and exclusively in an interchangeable sequence.

The period of Romanticism was followed by an unprecedented development of 'mimetic' realism. Nevertheless the grotesque continued to be a frequently used method,¹¹ although its functions and spheres of application were in a constant shift. It was almost inevitable that in their portrayal of the world, nineteenth-century realist writers would face cases of ultimate poverty and debasement bordering on an alternative reality, more familiar to the

⁹ See: Sokół, who maintains that turning to the grotesque at the beginning of the nineteenth century was seen as the antithesis of a decorum-defined classicism. In his view, divisions into pure forms – tragedies or comedies, compulsory in the previous epoch of Classicism, became now less obvious (1973:23-34). See also Kayser, the chapter on 'The Grotesque in the Age of Romanticism' (1981:48-99). Modern concepts of tragicomedy and its relation to the grotesque are discussed briefly in Barasch and supported by the following comment based on the views of Guthke: 'in the grotesque-absurd, the world is weird and distorted; in tragicomedy, the action "remains within the confines of logic and what is generally accepted as the common characteristics of reality..."' (1971:161-162). Thomson makes similar point, saying that 'tragi-comedy points only to the fact that life is alternately tragic and comic', while the grotesque pronounces that 'the vale of tears and the circus are one, that tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy in some way tragic and pathetic' (1972:63).

¹⁰ As noted by Clayborough (1965:48), one of the first expressions of this idea had been in the 'Preface' to *Cromwell* (1827) by Victor Hugo. See below, p. 16.

¹¹ See Kayser: 'Our brief glance at English literature furnishes additional proof that the grotesque has also its place in realism.' Kayser illustrates his point referring to Dickens, who in his opinion, 'does not always require the supernatural to alienate the world' and calls this type of the grotesque 'realistic' (1981:123). He sees it differently though in German literature, where the grotesque in nineteenth-century realism, in his view, 'almost consistently constituted a watered down version of Romantic modes of creation' (1981:130).

grotesque than to the comprehensible world. To illustrate this, one may refer to the 'ghastly grotesquerie of death in the nineteenth-century city', as featured in the satiric works of Dickens.¹² In Russian literature, too, we can find works regarded as realistic, but studded with descriptions of impoverishment, ugliness or moral decay which many critics approach today as grotesque. Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Dostoevsky and Sologub,¹³ to name only the most prominent, used the device of the grotesque with powerful effect when portraying both the complex nature of humanity and the social and moral degeneration of life in nineteenth-century Russia. Speaking of Gogol's phantasmagoric art, the nineteenth-century Russian critic Dobrolyubov wrote: 'It is not important to us what the author wanted to say, but rather what was said by him, even if not intentionally; simply as a result of the truthful portrayal of life' (in Gorelov 1961:273).¹⁴

It is thus clear that as a result of the rapid development of civilisation as, for instance, urbanisation, its impact on society and its individual members during the nineteenth century, the grotesque became a notion identified with truth and reality. The nineteenth-century writer, whether in Russia or in England, would use the grotesque as an emphatic way 'to open his readership to realities they had rejected', if one may generalise the statement made by Hill in respect of Dickens (1981:10).¹⁵ Nevertheless, works with the 'radically modified' (Bolecki's term, 1991:123) portrayal of the world were frequently misinterpreted by contemporary critics-purists, who accused their authors of undue naturalism, exaggeration and even of deforming reality.¹⁶ It was only when the nature of

¹² M. Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*. London, 1984:13.

¹³ See respectively: V. Erlich, *Gogol*. New Haven, 1969; M. Bakhtin, 1984a. L. J. Ivanits, 'The Grotesque in Fedor Sologub's Novel *The Petty Demon*.' *Russian and Slavic Literature*. Slavica Publishers, 1976. It should be noted though, that there still is a considerable need to research the grotesque in Russian nineteenth-century literature.

¹⁴ A. E. Горелов, *Очерки о русских писателях*. Ленинград, 1961.

¹⁵ N. K. Hill, *A Reformer's Art: Dickens' Picturesque and Grotesque Imagery*. Athens, Ohio, 1981.

¹⁶ Gogol's case is the classical example here. Thanks to the prominent Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848), throughout the nineteenth century Gogol was seen as an

the modern grotesque became to be understood better that these works gained profound significance and their revealing character became apparent.

Until the nineteenth century, the grotesque in art was viewed as a mode either juxtaposed to nature or of its deformation, for whatever reason (playful decoration or critical attitude to it; for example satire, caricature, parody), and enriching it with the ambivalent portrayal of the world.¹⁷ But nineteenth-century artists began to see the grotesque not only as a mode but also as a phenomenon of nature and life itself. The pivotal role in this regard is attributed to the 'Preface' to *Cromwell*¹⁸ by Victor Hugo (1802-1885), where the French Romantic associated the grotesque portrayal with truth (Clayborough 1965:48). Thomson, echoing Clayborough's interpretation of the 'Preface' says that 'Hugo associates the grotesque not with the fantastic but with the realistic, making it clear that the grotesque is not just an artistic mode or category but exists in nature and in the world around us' (1972:16-17). This view was promoted by other nineteenth-century artists such as Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), who observed that the grotesque always existed in nature

exemplary realist writer in the true classical sense. This led to the interpretation of his writing as a critical comment on the abominable state of Russian society in the first half of the century. It was only the Russian Formalists who started to speak of the illusory character of Gogol's realism. The *grotesque* approach to Gogol's writing shifts emphasis from the social to the psychological and philosophical significance of his work and makes it universal. This can be illustrated with the example of his short story *Шинель* (The Overcoat), which was interpreted as a tale about the tsarist clerk – a little man – whose fate was determined by his poor social background and material deprivation. Viewed as a work of the grotesque, *The Overcoat* is interpreted in terms of the spiritual poverty of a man obsessively preoccupied with material possession, languid and submissive (see Erlich *Gogol*. New Haven, 1969). Interestingly enough, similar accusations of 'false naturalism and entrails-oriented (*bebechowatość*) literature' were directed at Jasieński and his fellow futurist poets (see Balcerzan, *Styl i Poetyka Twórczości Dwójczycznej Brunona Jasieńskiego*. Wrocław, 1968:139).

¹⁷ See Kayser's brief comments on the grotesque in nineteenth-century English literature (1981:122-123).

¹⁸ Clayborough underlines that the understanding of the grotesque in Romantic art varied from country to country. For instance it had a different connotation in German Romanticism (ETA Hoffmann), in English (Scott, Byron). The French understanding of the concept interests us, however, because as he puts it, it acquired 'revolutionary overtones' and was 'associated with artistic freedom and the overthrow of cramping conventions' (1965:13), which makes it relevant for our study. A similar role and purpose was ascribed to the grotesque by the avant-garde artists at the beginning of the twentieth century (see the next chapter).

and in art.¹⁹ This statement by the French writer is given serious consideration by some contemporary scholars, even though the issue of the grotesque in nature still seems to be a bone of contention in contemporary criticism of the grotesque. Reiterating Kayser's view on this issue, Clayborough prefers to believe that the grotesque is born in 'the unconscious mind' and its origins can be motivated only by psychological phenomena. But, even if reluctantly, Clayborough makes provision for an alternative approach, qualifying his statement with the following:

[...] unless one is prepared to accept the idea that grotesqueness is objectively real, and that the grotesque is a simple reflection of actual phenomena – an idea which might apply to the depiction of 'an exceptional monstrosity of horrid ugliness', but scarcely to the original 'grotesque' murals. (1965:69)

Clayborough's field of scholarly interest is a work of art and whether it is a creation entirely invented or inspired by reality it is eventually a product of a certain artistic mind and both its conscious and subconscious faculties. More recent works are willing to accept the grotesque as a fact of reality and a phenomenon of 'natural'. As Harpham puts it, 'whereas the grotesque had once seemed the very opposite of the real, recent commentators have seemed unable or unwilling to extricate the two from each other, and have even encouraged an identification between them' (1982:xix).²⁰

The artistic movement at the turn of the century, known under its common name as Modernism, exposed a new quality of the grotesque. Discussing the character of the grotesque in 'Young Poland' (equivalent to Western Modernism), Bolecki formulates a

¹⁹ Clayborough refers to *Les Grotesques*, published by Gautier in 1853 (1972:13).

²⁰ Harpham is adamant: 'That the grotesque exists has always been a given' (1982:xx). Harpham names a number of artists, scholars and works that affirm the grotesque as a fact of reality. He agrees himself with this view, quoting after Gahan Wilson a bizarre but true press report: 'In the early days of heart transplants, doctors attempted to transfer the heart of a pig to a man. In the middle of the operation, [...] the anaesthetized pig woke up and ran squealing around the room with the doctors in pursuit as the man died on the operating table' (*ibid.*:xix).

thesis that the movement was almost entirely grotesque.²¹ His argument can be summarised in the following way: Modernism as an artistic method was based on the fusion of all things and phenomena; its aesthetics were based on the synthesis, on the syncretic union of all arts, traditions, and cultures. Formally this meant the abolition of boundaries between objects, suppression of contours and permeation of shapes. In painting, this strategy was tantamount to the revival of ornaments and emphasis on fluid, undulating lines. Nature and true forms were not seen as restrictive, while symmetry and its laws were subjected to constant negotiations. Bolecki identifies as the typically modernistic devices 'biomorphism (likening objects and animated beings), including zoomorphism, anthropomorphism and fitomorphism, as well as micro- and macroscopy, i.e. presenting objects and beings (including insects, flowers and microbes) in their unnatural size'. In his view the whole of modernist art was permeated with the motif of metamorphosis and hybrid images, originating in pagan mythology. Other typically modernistic motifs, in his view, are: 'madness, insanity, fantastic or demonic atmosphere, masquerade, mask, mannequin, caricature, and the like' (1991:117). The paradox is that, despite this conspicuous similarity to the grotesque, says Bolecki, none of the modernists considered themselves grotesque artists, choosing instead more precise terms such as secession, symbolism, myth, caricature, or arabesque.

In his analysis of different types of modernistic grotesque, Bolecki arrives at the conclusion that all the grotesque works of that time, whether for the purpose of polemic, parody, or caricature, operate through a 'range of accessories' from various literary conventions, such as hybrids (mythology), devils (Gothic), monsters (fantastic), and harlequins (*commedia dell'arte*). But the reference to the tradition is always obliterated by the 'radical modification, both iconic and semantic', Bolecki argues. Thus, the paraphernalia of the *commedia dell'arte*, for instance, are shifted from its tradition of carnival to the environments characteristic of other conventions, resulting in such images as Pierrot with hoofs, borrowed from either mythology (satyr) or Gothic (Satan). The

²¹ The following summary is based on the chapter 'Od potworów do znaków pustych' ('From Monsters to Empty Signs') in *Pre-teksty i teksty* (1991:102-158).

same applies to other aspects of work, including language and its meaning, allowing the comic to be rendered as sad, or tragedy as a joke. The tradition is in a way deconstructed to allow artists to ponder over the discrepancies between the 'sign of tradition' and 'its traditional sense' (ibid.:120). By reaching to the devices characteristic of the grotesque, and extending the levels of impact of the grotesque in a work from theme, plot or image to those of style, namely, narration and lexicology, modernists put in doubt the effectiveness of rules governing artistic expression: the grotesque was no longer a phenomenon of the 'represented world' but became a 'mechanism' by which the meaning was created (ibid.:123-124).

It is evident from Bolecki's survey that modernistic grotesque, unlike the realistic grotesqueries by nineteenth-century realists, was born not out of the observation of nature and life, but was primarily a method of artistic expression: it was the Modernists' voice in their dialogue with history and even with the theory of art as a whole. The Modernists opened the door to aesthetic provocation and artistic anarchy, which their followers, the artists of the avant-garde, not only fully accepted but chose as the only possible form of the new art.

CHAPTER II

THE MODERN GROTESQUE

It seems to be so real and beyond any dispute: your hand. What you see is a smooth pink skin, covered with the most delicate hair. So simple and so undisputable.

And now – a piece of this skin sanctified by the cruel irony of microscope: ditches, pits, boundaries; thick stalks of unknown plants – once your hair; a huge chunk of earth – or meteorite, which fell down from an unreachable sky – the ceiling, that, which once was a particle of dust [...] And this all in fact is your hand.

[...] And art, born by this contemporaneous reality – can it be not fantastic, resembling a dream?

(Zamyatin *On Synthetism*)

Given the exceptional tangle of circumstances which shaped life in the twentieth century, it is no wonder that a proclivity for the grotesque became a distinguishing feature of twentieth-century art. In the same way as previous epochs striving for self-expression created art responding to their aesthetic and ethical needs, so did our own. Rapid industrialisation, unprecedented scientific and technological advances, wars, migration of masses of people, totalitarian regimes, were among the most important, although diverse, factors responsible for altering people's understanding of the world.

The elusiveness of reality and the senselessness of the world became a widely recognised notion from the very outset of our century as may be seen in the works of such famous, although diverse, authors as Kafka, Hašek, Grass, or Joyce. Their works were all created in response to a perception that the modern world needs its own distinct way of expressing itself. The Swiss playwright Dürrenmatt (quoted in Kayser 1981:11-12) commented that 'our world led us inevitably to the grotesque as it did to the atomic bomb [...]'. In his view, the grotesque 'is only a sensual expression, a sensuous paradox, the shape of a shapelessness, the face of a faceless world; and as our thinking seems to be unable to do without the concept of paradox, so is art'. He believed that we do not have the individual

feeling of guilt and feeling for tragedy, and that comedy alone is suited for us. Similar comment came from Andrey Sinyavsky, a one-time prominent Soviet dissident intellectual, who believed that only 'phantasmagoric art' in which the grotesque 'will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life' suits the spirit of our time, and that art can be 'truthful [only] with the aid of the absurd and the fantastic'.¹ This extraordinary success of the grotesque in the twentieth century has been noted by scholars ranging from Bakhtin and Kayser to Harpham and Mc Elroy. The reasons for this are manifold. While some point out that the grotesque has been used to portray decadence in society, others note that, through the grotesque, artists express the senselessness of life and the absurdity of modern civilisation. Scholars share the view of Harpham that modern writers find the grotesque to be a particularly suitable tool in expressing both man's 'freakish and absurd nature, and the nightmarish malignancy of the modern world' (1982:xix).

A comprehensive study of manifestations of the grotesque and its function in twentieth-century art has yet to be made. Whoever undertakes this difficult task will have to establish common grounds for the multiplicity of diverse trends and movements. Considerably easier is the examination of the modern grotesque in the form of a case study, as has been done by Wolfgang Kayser in his *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, the last chapter of which offers a rudimentary analysis of different grotesque works by individual modern authors, from drama and prose 'tales of terror', through the grotesque poetry of Morgenstern and Kafkaesque 'dream-like' novels, to surrealistic poetry and paintings. Acknowledging the tremendous popularity of the grotesque in the twentieth century, Kayser limits his survey to some of its manifestations, refraining from pointing out traits typical to the modern grotesque. More useful in this respect is Bernard Mc Elroy's *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. Admittedly, the focus of the study is on the source of the modern grotesque. Mc Elroy finds that it is produced by certain types of mental disposition, such as paranoid vision, hallucination, dream, or a degree of insanity, that is, its source is in the human mind and the processes of perception. Mc Elroy's basic assertion is that 'the grotesque is not

¹ (Abram Tertz). 'On Socialist Realism', in A. Sinyavsky, 'The Trial Begins' and 'Socialist Realism'. Berkeley, 1982:218-219. The essay originally appeared in *samizdat* in 1959.

only a real mode of life but the only real mode once modern life has been correctly perceived'. He points out that it is 'not merely an assault upon the idea of a rational world; it is an assault upon the reader himself, upon his sensibilities, upon his ideals, upon his feeling of living in a friendly familiar world or his desire to live in one'. It is an aggressive mode and provides an outlet for the emotional confusion of modern man. The centre stage in modern grotesque literature is given to a 'repugnant' individual, 'a humiliated man' – an 'anti-hero', whose actions are animated not by reason but by his degenerate nature, for as Mc Elroy asserts, 'perversity, not reason, is the basis of human character' (1989:27-28). Although Mc Elroy is primarily interested in the 'internal' or psychological source of the grotesque, we are not prevented from making the observation that the source of modern grotesque is firmly rooted in the outside world itself. The notion of tragedy has lost its relevance, not because it is obsolete in our troubled age, but because its dimension is altered. Tragedy became trivialised by its notorious presence in everyday life and is brought vividly into our homes through the mass media. Furthermore, the tragedy of an individual has become inconsequential in the context of the mass murders and genocide by which our century has become identified in history. We have learned not to cry over roses when forests are burning...

Avant-garde and the Grotesque

It is one characteristic of revolutions, whether literary, political, or scientific, that they liberate, dignify and pass through the grotesque.

(Harpham: On the Grotesque)

Avant-garde was the first artistic movement to reflect the spirit of the new times at the beginning of the twentieth century. The unconventional character of *l'esprit nouveau*² is

² The expression 'the spirit of the new times' belongs to Guillaume Apollinaire, who believed that the avant-garde artists inherited it from the Romantics and with it they inherited inquisitiveness which forced them 'to look wherever possible for literary material that would allow them to glorify life in all its forms. To find out the truth, to look for it in the human world, as well as, for instance, in the sphere of imagination' (in S. Jaworski *Avangarda*. Warszawa, 1992:144). The article was

itself reflected in the very name, summarily assumed by artistic movements at the time. The term ‘avant-garde’, borrowed from the military lexicon,³ was enthusiastically used in programmes by several artists, including Futurists. Adopting radical jargon as a language which reflected their militant attitude to the social, mental, and intellectual stagnation, artists counted themselves amongst ‘partisans, who intend to conquer the city of [human] consciousness’, as Bruno Jasieński himself put it (1972:239).⁴ In critical literature scholars such as J. Weisgerber stress that avant-garde artists were ‘fully conscious of being ahead of their time’. Frequently their rebellion was total: it was directed at accepted customs and morality, at social and political structures, it also is characterised by radical opposition to the established order in literature both in the sphere of form and theme. (1974:414)⁵

The grotesque – itself born out of the opposition to any canon – was then a logical choice. The emphasis on the violent rejection of everything that could be thought static, common, general, or acceptable made room for its aggressive and riotous character. The historical precedent had already been established in modernity during the Renaissance and the Romantic period when the revival of the grotesque as a part of ‘revolutionary’ artistic strategy accompanied dramatic shifts in world view. In a similar fashion, avant-garde artists rejected familiarity as synonymous with stagnation and boredom. They took it upon themselves to reassess, rethink and re-systematise every aspect of life according to the logic of the new times, hoping to induce excitement and life into art through defamiliarising the known and demolishing the established. Avant-garde artists accepted the grotesque both as part of life, and as a way to reflect its incongruity and ambivalence.

initially published in *Méreure de France* in 1918 (491).

³ See B. Carpenter, *The Poetic Avant-Garde in Poland 1918-1939*. Seattle, 1983:xi; Jaworski 1992:5. See also V. Erlich: The term ‘avant-garde’ was coined in mid-nineteenth-century France to designate art as ‘a vehicle for social change and reform’. He considers avant-garde ‘a prominent aspect of modernism’, the one whose primary aim was ‘to underline the emphatically future-oriented, iconoclastic, anti-bourgeois strain in modernism’ (*Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition*. Cambridge, 1994:3).

⁴ *Utwory poetyckie. Manifesty. Szkice*, introduction by E. Balcerzan. Wrocław, 1972.

⁵ *Les avant-gardes littéraires en XXe siècle*. S. l., 1974.

The grotesque entered avant-garde works as a mode naturally fitting in with the artistic manifestos which were calling for the renewal of art and which glorified creativity and imagination, licensing boundless artistic freedom and promoting the osmosis of genre, style, and form.

While Modernism can be credited with sanctioning the aesthetic grotesque, avant-garde took it further, paving the way for the philosophical grotesque in a sense that: 'an artist, who imposes new beauty, imposes new future' as Tadeusz Peiper,⁶ himself a prominent theoretician and avant-garde artist, put it (in Jaworski 1992:217). Peiper believed that it was the responsibility of art to influence the consciousness of people in order to enable them to accept the phenomena of modern times. Artists were told not to describe reality, but to capture the spirit of the new times, so that their product would embody a modern day itself and would 'breathe' with atmosphere and emotion. Owing both to its content and its form, the metaphor was singled out as the tool most befitting modern poetry. Peiper explained his position in this regard in his article *Metafora teraźniejszości* ('The Metaphor of Contemporaneity'), which was published in 1922 in *Zwrotnica*, the mouthpiece of avant-garde art in Poland.⁷ He pointed out that 'anti-realism' and 'economism' make the metaphor especially valuable to modern artists. Both these qualities suggest that Peiper's understanding of metaphor opened it to the grotesque.

The metaphor attracted Peiper's attention because of its inherent brevity.⁸ He believed that artists, who have to abide by the same laws of contemporaneity as other people, have to 'economise on words'. To Peiper it was an 'artistic necessity' to reach for metaphor,

⁶ Peiper (1891-1969) was an important figure for Polish Futurists. He was older than most of them and was considered more experienced, mainly owing to his prolonged stay in several Western European countries (Jaworski 1992:99). Peiper's role in Polish Futurism is assessed in T. Kłak, *Stolik Tadeusza Peipera*, Kraków, 1993.

⁷ Along with other theoretical writing by Peiper, it was reprinted in the anthology of the avant-garde programmes and manifestos compiled by S. Jaworski 1992.

⁸ Brevity as an important characteristic of the modern grotesque is, among others, pointed out by Harpham (1982:64).

which is in itself an abbreviation of a comparison, he argued, since it does not require the use of the comparative 'like'. Metaphor replaces long qualifiers, it economises on 'lexical cotton-wool' and its use is in itself a sign of contemporaneity. Peiper emphasised, though, that brevity for its own sake might not necessarily be a virtue of metaphor, since its primary function is to successfully convey a message, which is in turn secured through a 'content' of concepts, subjected to metaphoric manipulations. As a device, metaphor is not suitable for the realistic reconstruction of the world and cannot be used for description, hence its anti-realism characterised by an arbitrary relationship of concepts, which in turn creates conceptual associations that have no equivalent in the real world. By its intrinsic nature, metaphor contradicts the idea of a 'slavish stock-taking of reality'. On the contrary, transferring concepts into provinces to which they do not belong, metaphor converts empirical reality and recreates it as a new reality, one which is purely poetic (in Jaworski 1992:210).

To fulfil its objective to 'shatter [established] emotional hierarchy', modern metaphor in Peiper's interpretation relies on certain techniques:

Great things are reduced to insignificance, small things are elevated to greatness. Festive, or even holy things are arranged together with prosaic and common ones, while the latter are placed amongst solemn and sanctified concepts. Reluctantly accepted objects, normally belonging to the mundane spheres of life and world, and which are repulsive to the aesthetic sensitivity of an average man, are amalgamated⁹ with such objects, which have strong emotional resonance in man. (Peiper in *ibid.* 1992:212)

Peiper elucidates his discussion, using the image of the sun – 'this object of perpetual admiration from Homer to Rimbaud', as he puts it – which to a modern artist is nothing but a 'golden pimple', while the button in one's trousers assumes the significance of a 'mirror of one's greatness' (*ibid.*). Although Peiper does not utter the word 'grotesque', it is easily seen that his views on the character and method of creating a modern metaphor coincide with the characteristics and methods inherent to the grotesque. As previously noted in Bolecki's analysis of the Modernists' manipulations with different aesthetic codes

⁹ In original: *amalgamuje się*.

and literary forms, here too, Peiper's judgement on metaphor, its function, *modus operandi* and underlying 'technical' considerations, lead directly to the grotesque. Even more to the point, for want of a better option, his deliberations regarding metaphor can stand as a definition of the grotesque itself.

By his own admission, Peiper's reference to the image of the sun is intended to prove the iconoclastic character of modern art in response to the shifts taking place in the hierarchy of values. What was formerly seen as sublime and of higher significance now becomes trivial and, by analogy, what was trivial and meaningless assumes unprecedented importance. He calls it 'the levelling of hierarchy' which inevitably has to take place in all aspects of human life, because modern people freed themselves from the fear of nature and learned to use the forces of nature to their advantage *ibid.*).

Peiper's sentiments were consonant with widespread feelings during that period that it was time for artists to take note of shifts taking place in the perception of the world, and to reflect them not only formally but also through the content of their art. While Peiper illustrated his views through his interpretation of metaphor, Russian Formalists, who admittedly sensed that need as early as 1917, did this through the concept of *остранение*,¹⁰ that is 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarisation'. This concept, known also in

¹⁰ The term was first used in 1917 by V. Shklovsky in 'Искусство как прием' ('Art as a device'), reprinted in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten*, Vol. I. Munich, 1969:16. Shklovsky's concept of 'estrangement' is linked to the theories of the Russian linguist A. Potebnya, who maintained that because in everyday language words stand for things and relationships in the external world, it is necessary for their meaning to be fixed and known to all. Interpreting Shklovsky's concept of estrangement Børtnes in his essay 'V. Shklovsky or the Rhetoric of Strange Making' notes: 'Apart from its fixed, conceptual or referential meaning, however, the word's internal form is charged with a meaningfulness that in practical usage is either suppressed or obliterated. In poetry, this inner meaningfulness of the word, its "figurativeness" (образность), is activated and brought to expression through its external, phonetic form. The result of this is that in poetry the word's conceptual or referential meaning loses its conventional *unambiguity*, which is replaced by an open or dislocated reference. The conceptual meanings that were parts of the poet's original message can therefore never be identical with what, from his point of view, the reader takes the text to mean' (*Scando Slavica* 1993:6-7).

German as *Verfremdung*,¹¹ became one of the important notions in modern criticism. The term initially referred to the linguistic fabric of literature, but soon, especially in its more general understanding, spread to other aspects of art, such as, for instance, the use of imagery. Russian Formalists believed that whether through language or image, the device of defamiliarisation would prompt readers to an intellectual effort and force them to consider alternative interpretations. Although Peiper denied any influence of this device for the particular popularity of figurative, that is metaphoric, language in avant-garde art,¹² he admitted that a work of art which used unorthodox modes and means of expression was considered more meaningful, and stood as a proof of the artists' respect for their own thought and respect for their reader's intellectual potential (ibid.:214). Avant-garde, indeed, paid exceptional attention to the form of their art, although its different manifestations attributed to it different roles. Peiper, sympathising in this regard with Constructivists, believed that art serves society as much through its content as it does through its form. He maintained that 'it is the social duty of an artist to take care of the form of his art' (ibid.:216).

The idea of defamiliarisation is significant for the popularity of the grotesque in modern art in the same way as was Peiper's concept of metaphor. In fact, it may also be mistaken for the concept of the grotesque itself, and it was used in this sense from its inception, as seen in Formalist scholarship.¹³ Kayser finds this relationship so important that he prints in capital letters: 'THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD', warning at the same time that the grotesque is a special kind of estrangement, for the familiar may be shown anew

¹¹ The term is attributed to Bertolt Brecht; it belongs to the same tradition with Shklovsky's 'estrangement'. It is possible that the term was transmitted to Brecht by his Russian friend, playwright Sergey Tretyakov (see B. Reich, *Im Wettlauf mit der Zeit*. Berlin, 1979:371-372).

¹² He maintained that in essence, the device of estrangement is nothing other than one of the long recognised features of art – the tendency towards innovation and that art always strives to place the familiar in a new light (in Jaworski 1992: 210).

¹³ As seen for instance in an essay on the grotesque in Gogol by Zundelovich, who drew such an analogy in 1925. See the reprint of his article 'Проблемы поэтики' Пoэтика гротеска (К вопросу о характере гоголевского творчества) in Пoэтика: Хрестоматия по вопросам литературоведения для слушателей университета. Москва, 1992:114.

by another familiar, or the fantastic by another fantastic (1981:184). To be more precise we may say that every instance of the grotesque originates in an estranged world, but not every case of estrangement may be taken as the grotesque. Only by saying this may we set up conditions which have to be obeyed if the estranged world is to be perceived in categories of the grotesque. Kayser states the following: 'It is our world which has to be transformed. Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque'. Even if we decide to treat the notion of estrangement with due caution, one thing is certain: the technique of estrangement paves the way for the grotesque, encourages its use, and is consonant with its aims.

To sum up, we may say that the avant-garde understanding of both metaphor and estrangement facilitated wide use of the grotesque in avant-garde art, provided that certain rules regarding content and form were observed. Avant-garde art had to impact on readers through the defamiliarisation of the world, making it possible to see it anew; it relied on the ambiguity of language, and exploited constant tension between its familiar, prosaic meaning and its figurative potential. And, although both metaphor and the device of defamiliarisation were primarily considered as a matter of form, avant-garde art extended their application beyond a poetic function, venturing into the field of semantic and visual categories and exploring their image-creating potential as well as their power to revive readers emotionally.

It is not possible to speak of avant-garde in general terms for much longer. At considerable risk of running into controversy, I have tried to outline a background common to various avant-garde movements. I have tried to identify certain factors in this background which made it conducive to the grotesque. Radical opposition to the prevailing canon, the sharp realisation of dramatic changes in the quality of life because of demographic movements and historical events, the rapid development of technology and science, as well as the emphatic need to take a stand on these issues, may be seen as the ultimate source of the grotesque in avant-garde art. It can be said that various avant-garde movements were posing similar questions with similar urgency, collectively recognising the imperative need for those questions to be addressed. Beyond that, however, avant-garde meant different

things to different artists and when it came to answers and conclusions, the split into groupings, trends, movements and schools, became inevitable. For instance, Expressionists believed in the superiority of spirit over matter, Futurists, on the other hand, in the superiority of matter over spirit; Constructivists put their trust in the modern civilisation, industrialisation and urbanism; Surrealists, originating from Dada, stood for the liberation of man, of his desires and psychic potential. Like Futurists, they emphasised imagination based on free association of concepts, but did not share the Futurists' belief that art must transform life. In the end, coming from a similar background, artists of different movements have followed different paths when looking for solutions. Because creative uniqueness was so emphasised, the same applies to discussing individual representatives of these movements. Basing his views on certain general assumptions and programmes, the individual artists gave their own interpretation in accordance with their own intellectual and creative potential. Jasieński himself emphasised these differences, seeing them as an artist's obligation to find an individual artistic path: 'Art is creating new things. [...] Every artist is obliged to create absolutely new, exceptional art, only then has he a right to call it his own (1972:211). Thus, writing his summary of Polish Futurism, he emphatically stated that Futurism was for him a personal matter and, although his views were shaped by the artistic ferment of the time, their formulation was his own (*ibid.*:234). Bearing this in mind, Jasieński's own theoretical contribution to the movement will be discussed further in Part II.

Socialist Realism and the Grotesque

Once upon a time there was a mighty ruler of a powerful country who had a no right arm and no right eye and wanted to have his picture painted for official display. One of the artists submitted to him his portrait as he was, without one arm and one eye. He was immediately hanged for 'bourgeois formalism'. Another painter presented his picture of the Dictator with both arms and eyes. He was executed for 'bourgeois idealism'. Finally, the third artist submitted his portrait depicting the tyrant with the left arm and the left eye to the viewer's side. This one was duly awarded the prize for 'socialist realism'.¹⁴

It is hardly possible to imagine a more sinister response to the buoyant artistic avant-garde ferment than the one that developed in the Soviet Union, the very political structure emotionally and intellectually conceived by this ferment. As noted by Stefan Morawski, all avant-garde movements questioned the official world outlook and contested 'the ruling ethos' as false. The existing social systems were declared 'ill' while their embodiments – the state and its functionaries like the police and the armed forces – were labelled antihuman (1989:85).¹⁵ On those very grounds the social and political rebellion in 1917 in Russia was intellectually supported from the start by most of the avant-garde movements. Futurism, which gave absolute priority in its hierarchy of artistic values to innovation and experiment and based its aesthetics on the rejection of tradition, was particularly responsive to the changing times.¹⁶ The October Revolution made a dramatic

¹⁴ M. K. Dziewanowski notes that this anecdote was circulating among independently-minded Soviet intellectuals, expressing their attitude towards socialist realism (*A History of Soviet Russia*. Engelwood Cliffs, 1989:212).

¹⁵ 'On the Avant-Garde and the Case of Postmodernism.' *Literary Studies in Poland*. Ossolineum, 1989(XXI).

¹⁶ See H. Stephan 'Futurism and the Social Functions of Literature', *Russian Literature and American Critics*, edited by K. N. Brostrom. Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1984:191-210, p. 193. Also, A. Sinyavsky *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History*. New York, 1990, chapter 'Utopia Found,' where the following quotation from Mayakovsky's *Open Letter to the Workers* (1918) illustrates this enthusiasm for change: 'No one is allowed to know what immense suns will illuminate the life of the future. Perhaps the artists will turn the gray dust of the cities into hundred-colour rainbows; perhaps the mountains will resound endlessly with the thunderous strains of volcanos transformed into flutes; perhaps we'll force the ocean waves to run fingers over the strings that stretch from

difference to the artistic aspirations of avant-garde artists in Russia. Their attempt to advance the modern idea of culture found its embodiment in the radically new political system, or so the artists initially believed. However, it soon became evident that what they had in mind was remarkably different from the ideas of politicians.¹⁷

After the period of relative freedom of expression, permitted immediately after the Revolution and during the twenties, came a period of unprecedented gloom for the Russian *belle lettres*. The avant-garde in Russia ceased to exist as a result of the decree of 23 April 1932, issued by the Communist Party's Central Committee. The ruling was motivated by the need to end the rivalry which had developed between various groupings 'on the artistic and cultural front' (Groys 1992:33).

As a replacement for the 'anarchic' diversity of the avant-garde, Party ideologists suggested that the writing fraternity join the Party in its task of building the new Communist society. With this purpose in mind a single body – the Union of Soviet Writers – was formed,¹⁸ to which all who claimed to be writers were obliged to subscribe. Soon the Writers' Union became the state's primary instrument for maintaining control over all creative works. In return, this mammoth organisation made its members secure with special privileges such as a stable income, the right to accommodation, and guaranteed publication of their works. By analogy, expulsion from this body was tantamount to literary death, and subsequently became the first step towards the physical annihilation of

Europe to America. One thing we do know: the first page of the newest history of the arts will have been written by us' (ibid.:42-43). See also V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (1980:70-99) and *Modernism and Revolution* (1994).

¹⁷ For a brief comparison of the avant-garde and socialist realism see B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, translated by Charles Rougle. Princeton, 1992:33-75.

¹⁸ As noted by J. Brooks: 'Significantly, Gor'kii was the only writer on the "Honorary Presidium of the Union," which was otherwise composed exclusively of party and Comintern officials, including Stalin' ('Socialist Realism in *Pravda*: Read All About It!' *Slavic Review*. 1994:982-983.

‘disgraced’ writers.¹⁹ Having absolute control over writers, the Union was able to streamline all spontaneous artistic inspiration and creativity into planned and organised production measured in the same way as the output of industrial activities.²⁰ Using an analogy with the grotesque, one may say that the metaphoric longing of many avant-garde artists to become prophets, ideological and intellectual guides for masses of people, was indeed enacted – but with a sinister twist to it. Artists were to become not only ‘engineers of souls’²¹ but also ‘craftsmen of culture’.²² ‘Usefulness’ was given priority over aesthetics, as argued by Sinyavsky who, tracing the origins of this tendency to 1919, illustrates his argument with a citation from Osip Brik’s article, *The Artist and the Commune*:

The cobbler makes boots. The joiner makes tables. And what does the artist do? He doesn’t do anything; he ‘creates.’ This is vague and suspect. ... The commune doesn’t need

¹⁹ See A. Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia 1928-1939*. New York, 1991, especially the chapter ‘The Terror’.

²⁰ For example, a note in *Pravda* (1/29/29): ‘If we look to the development of literature in the past year, then a simple question arises – is our literature growing, can we speak about regular achievement in this area?’ The passion for production records is reflected in the following quantification of literature, also in *Pravda* (4/13/33): ‘[Demyan Bedny] wrote twenty volumes and more than 150,000 lines of fighting verses’ (both in Brooks 1984:983).

²¹ The expression is attributed to Stalin; see Brooks (1994:982) and T. Klimowicz (*Przewodnik po współczesnej literaturze rosyjskiej i jej okolicach (1917-1996)*. Wrocław, 1996:260). It was subsequently used as a buzz-term evident in the speeches delivered during the First Congress of the Union. See for instance, the speeches of Zhdanov and Gorky (*Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934*. London, 1977:21 and 67, respectively). Brooks perceptively points out the intrinsic ‘disingenuity’ of the expression, because the word ‘engineer’ was already devalued by the notorious trials of the technological intelligentsia which took place during the years 1928-1930. Apart from that, he notes that ‘although the word “engineers” aligned the arts with the construction industry, the word “souls” (*dyuuu*) implied a spiritual function’ (1994:983).

²² This term was also used by Gorky in his congress speech. This and subsequent references to Gorky should by no means be taken as an attempt to castigate him for his contribution to the oppression of arts in the Soviet Russia. Gorky’s role is much too complex and still being researched, especially in the view of the availability of previously inaccessible data. I quote Gorky merely to verify the *oeuvre*. A good start in re-evaluating his contribution has been made by H. Ermolaev who mentions, for instance, that Gorky ‘branded as “spiritual vampirism” the withdrawal of certain works by foreign and Russian philosophers [...] from the largest Soviet libraries’ *Soviet Literary Theories 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism*. Berkeley, 1963:149.

priests or parasites. Only workers will find a place in it. If artists don't want to wind up like the parasitic elements, they'd better prove their right to existence. (1990:47)²³

Concurrently with the infringement of freedom of association, steps were taken to limit freedom of expression by imposing on writers themes and forms permissible in the new Soviet literature. These rigid prescriptions soon received the status of the only admissible creative method and became known as socialist realism. According to Ermolaev, the term 'socialist realism' was coined by Ivan Gronsky who was at the time nominated by the Party as chairman of the committee entrusted with the task of establishing the writers' union (1963:4). The statement reprinted subsequently in *Literaturnaya gazeta* (20/5/32) reads as follows: 'The basic demand that we make on the writer is: write the truth, portray truthfully our reality that is in itself dialectic. Therefore the basic method of Soviet literature is the method of socialist realism' (ibid.:144). Further qualified, extended, and its ideological implications amplified – as seen in statements of various origin²⁴ – socialist realism defined the character of Russian literature for more than twenty years of the most oppressive political dictatorship the arts ever had to endure. Its official definition adopted by the First Congress of Soviet Writers' Union appeared in *Pravda* (5/6/34) in the following words:

Socialist realism, the basic method of Soviet artistic literature and literary criticism, demands truthfulness (*pravdivost'*) from the artist and an historically concrete portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development. Under these conditions, truthfulness and historical concreteness of artistic portrayal ought to be combined with the task of the ideological remaking and education of labouring people in the spirit of socialism. (In Brooks 1994:977)²⁵

²³ Sinyavsky eloquently raises the issue of 'utilitarianism' as the one originating in Lenin's belief that life is only as valid as it serves the community (1990:47).

²⁴ Quoted widely, among others, in Ermolaev 1963:139-206, M. Parkhomenko, A. Myasnikov (comp.), *Socialist Realism in Literature and Art: A Collection of Articles*. Moscow, 1971; Kemp-Welch, 1991; Groys, 1992; Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetics*. Stanford, 1992.

²⁵ Similar texts appear in Dziewanowski 1989:212 and C. A. Moser, *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*. Cambridge, 1992:459. Its extended version appears in Robin 1992:11.

The final version was vague²⁶ enough to enable various officials and critics to manipulate it to serve as a lethal weapon in sentencing hundreds of artists during Stalin's dictatorship to imprisonment or even death. But, while socialist realism as an historical peculiarity should continue to be examined – for among other things it throws light on the operational strategies of dictatorships – its impact on the development of Russian literature during the nineteen-thirties is more relevant to this study.²⁷

The formulation of the definition of socialist realism did not foretell the problems that were experienced by artists who might have wanted to express themselves through the grotesque.²⁸ The term 'socialist realism' contains two notions: of ideology (socialist) and of artistic method (realism). It has been noted that realism and the grotesque are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and in its own unique way the grotesque *is* truthful to life. This view is also accepted in the growing Russian scholarship on the subject. Yury Mann, in his study *On the Grotesque in Literature* admits to it in the context of Gogol and Dostoevsky (1966:32), but also in direct statements such as 'the realistic grotesque [is] like life itself; the more we look at it, the more sense it makes' (ibid.101-102). The problem thus lies not in the formulation of the definition but in the interpretation of socialist realism, its application in the practice of literature, and in Soviet literary criticism, all of which were heavily dependent on the ideological context.

The intrinsic incompatibility of the grotesque and socialist realism is seen from the start, although no study has yet been made with the intention to assess this complex relationship.

²⁶ Robin finds 'the blur, the vagueness, and the general opacity' of the term to be one of the 'tragedies' of the Congress. Everyone left it – she says – 'with his own definition of socialist realism' (1992:74).

²⁷ One of the more recent discussions on socialist realism is recorded in a collection of articles, representative of a spectrum of views, compiled by E. A. Dobrenko as *Избавление от миражей: Соцреализм сегодня*. Moscow, 1990. One of the extreme views, expressed by A. Gangnus, is that to look for the aesthetic aspect of socialist realism is a waste of paper, for it is neither an aesthetic phenomenon nor a creative method, but a disguised religion (ibid.:150).

²⁸ As noted by Nikolaev, the 'rehabilitation of the grotesque' took place in 1952 in consequence of the article by G. Nedoshvin. 'Границы гротеска' *Вопросы литературы*, 1968:76.

An attempt to summarise several points of obvious discord would begin with Kayser's statement that 'The creators of grotesque have no advice that they can follow' (1981:187), nor do they seek any, we may add. Socialist realism is prescriptive by nature – Soviet writers were told what and how to write. The relevant instructions were given at the highest level, by Stalin himself: 'Do not invent images and events ... take them from life – learn from life. Let life teach you.' The theoreticians of socialist realism rejected nineteenth-century critical realism as a typically bourgeois notion²⁹ and proclaimed Soviet reality to be the most important source of inspiration for artists. Gorky pointed this out in his address to young writers: 'In literature, socialist realism can appear only as a reflection of the facts of socialist creativity provided by practical experience. Can such realism appear in Soviet literature? It not only can, it must' (in Parkhomenko and Myasnikov 1971:42). By analogy, the Soviet reality became a yardstick by which the calibre of the author's talent and the correctness of a literary work was verified.³⁰ The interpretation of the definition of socialist realism relied on the ambiguity of language – in itself, a fact worthy of the grotesque, for nothing was what it seemed to be³¹ – and 'to reflect reality' actually meant that reality should not be portrayed *as it is* but *as it should*

²⁹ Both Zhdanov and Gorky spoke extensively on this subject in their Congress speeches (see *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934*, London, 1977).

³⁰ See Gorky's Congress speech, in which he reprimands literary critics for their incompetence: 'There is much in our country and in our work which Marx and Engels could not, of course, have foreseen. Critics tell the author: "That is wrong, because our teachers have said so and so in this connection." But they are incapable of saying: "That is wrong, because the facts of reality contradict the author's statement"' (*Soviet Writers...* 1977:61).

³¹ This line from Gogol's *Nevsky Avenue*: *Все обман, все мечта, все не то, чем кажется*. ('All is deception, all is illusion, nothing is what it seems to be' (1936:236)) seemed to cast a spell over the Soviet life. In various guises it appeared in works of writers, which Heller makes the object of his brief but informative study. He quotes Platonov's *Город Градов* (1926): *Все замещено! Все стало подложным! Все не настоящее а суррогат*, 'Everything is substituted! Everything is replaceable. Everything is not genuine but a surrogate' ('Подмена как образ жизни' ('Substitution as a Way of Life') *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*. Vol. XXX(3-4), 1989:298). This uncertainty affected every aspect of life. The point I am trying to make here, however, is that while the ambiguity of language was forcefully eradicated in creative writing, it thrived in the official 'newspeak', as Orwell called it later. The literature on this topic, both creative (Ehrenburg's *Strannye pokhozhdeniya Lazika Roytshvanetsa*, Platonov's *Foundation Pit*) and scholarly (see the chapter 'The Soviet Language' in Sinyavsky 1990), is as entertaining as it is disturbing.

be.³² In accordance with the prescriptions of socialist realism, any critical attitude was forbidden and an optimistic approach was enforced, later to become known as a process of 'varnishing reality' (see Ermolaev 1963:135). Ermolaev puts it in the following way: 'While the depiction of negative aspects of Soviet life was severely criticised, the idealisation of this life was, on the contrary, incessantly encouraged as an indispensable ingredient of revolutionary romanticism.' (ibid.:190). Literature, along with all other arts, was expected to edify the Soviet reality, promote its success, glorify its leaders. It comes as no surprise then that there was no place in it for ambivalence, for a hidden message, for individual interpretation, for incongruity and for a mocking jeer – all of which thrive in grotesque works, or to quote Ermolaev once more:

[...] the dearth of the fantastic, the grotesque, and the allegorical in Soviet literature bespeaks the fact that these elements have been in official disfavour. The Party has obviously preferred ungarnished, straightforward writings, intelligible to the masses and shorn of political ambiguities. (Ermolaev 1963:188)

One of the most 'dangerous' qualities of the grotesque from the vantage point of socialist realism is its inherent inconclusiveness. In the grotesque work every word is a carrier of ambivalence. The Soviet scholar of the grotesque, Yury Mann, points this out indirectly, quoting in his study one theatre director who complained that it is extremely difficult ('one has first to eat a barrel of salt') to stage Pirandello's plays – 'one of the greatest writers of the grotesque in the twentieth century' – because of the indeterminacy typical of the grotesque (1966:32-33).³³ What may initially appear as innocuous laughter and play, during a closer reading reveals more profound (or, by implication, undesirable) meaning. The grotesque work is deceptive because within the whimsical outlines of its world one presumes that there is a reference genuine reality. Although Mann refrains from drawing

³² See comments by the modern Russian linguist Grigorij Krejdin: 'Gra z tożsamością' ('Play with Identity'), *Teksty Drugie* 25(1), 1994:127-134.

³³ Mann refers to a fragment from one of Pirandello's plays, where the following discussion takes place between 'respectable spectators': 'You heard a word, – let's say "table". Oh, to hell with it, have you heard it? He said "table", but I won't be taken for a ride! Who knows, what hides behind this table!' (1966:32). Mann, not without reason, quotes the Italian playwright whose biting irony perfectly fits the mistrust with which Russian writers were treated by the authorities.

conclusions about the possible clash of the two artistic methods, one sees immediately that there was nothing in the grotesque that the proponents of socialist realism could use; more significantly, these proponents must have seen the grotesque as a potentially dangerous device, especially if handled by a talented and imaginative mind.

One of the primary goals of socialist realist literature was to promote the ideas of Communism. The grotesque, by contrast, refuses to serve any cause or to worship one god; it derides all gods and shuns all causes, which is why among others its use in satire is always problematic (see Chapter VII). It may be said that the grotesque by its very nature is anarchic and close to the 'carnivalistic sense of the world' which, through its 'joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order' (Bakhtin, 1984a:160).³⁴ For this very reason, dialectic grotesque clashes with the monologic discourse of Soviet fiction. Erlich sums this up: 'For one thing, the modernistic bias of the Formalist spokesmen, their proclivity for irony and parody, were totally incompatible with exigencies of totalitarian propaganda, which had no truck with ambiguity. [...] The "semantic shifts", the outsize metaphors, the abrupt, montage-like juxtapositions were no longer allowed. "Form" was not supposed to deflect the reader's or viewer's attention from the only thing that mattered – the edifying and straightforward message' (1994:276-277).

To fulfil their propagandist task, Soviet writers were expected to create positive heroes, dedicated to the revolutionary cause and certain of their purpose in life, uniformly defined as promoting Communism (Gorky in Parkhomenko and Myasnikov 1971:49).³⁵ The

³⁴ The analogy seems clear, since Marxists believed that Communism was the final stage of history. See M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Princeton (1974:149). Reading Bakhtin, one may consider the possibility of seeing in his study of Renaissance grotesque encoded views on his own epoch (see Booker 1995).

³⁵ See Robin, Chapter X, 'The New Trajectory of the Hero' (1992:217-298). An interesting insight into the type of socialist realist hero is given by Katerina Clark in her book, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Chicago, 1981.

positive heroes of socialist realism should know how to overcome all difficulties, be alert and be able to sense deceit and the enemy instinctively. With this comes the necessity to see evil, to name it and mercilessly to exterminate it, so the 'cause' will not be harmed. According to the paradigm of socialist realism readers must remain convinced that evil was justifiably destroyed, that the 'good' which was allowed to triumph is ideologically correct. The grotesque does not differentiate between evil and good, for its creator sees both these forces constantly struggling in humankind. In the grotesque world there is usually no need to fight enemies, the castigation of characters is confused and frequently villains appear also to be victims, evoking simultaneously in readers their contempt and sympathy. The grotesque undermines the wisdom of a hero's actions and doubts his ideological dedication. The readers' attitude to the grotesque hero is inevitably that of ambivalence, whereas a hero of socialist realist literature should evoke unequivocal admiration. By deliberate intention, a socialist realist hero had a beautiful healthy body³⁶ matched by his pure mind – the type of *bogatyr'* (Clark makes this point very lucidly in *The Soviet Novel* [1981]). The grotesque hero was designed to illustrate that the beautiful body might hide a sinister or a vain soul, or that on the contrary, a crippled body might harbour a kind and loving heart. While socialist realism was designed to build confidence in the basic goodness of people, the grotesque could offer only suspicion and disseminate mistrust in appearances and ideologies.

The chief objective of socialist realism was to evoke in readers satisfaction with the world as it is, gain their approval of the ways in which it functions, make them want to be part of this universe. Also in this case the grotesque as a mode of expression is entirely unsuitable for socialist realism, for its chief objective is to evoke in readers emotional unrest and the fear of life (Kayser points this out (1981:184)). The grotesque originates in the profound dissatisfaction with the world, conveyed subsequently in the chaos and

³⁶ The handicapped or crippled body was used to show how the power of mind and dedication can overcome physical impairment, and true Communists actually turned their affliction to their advantage, as it gave them greater determination to succeed. See for example Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered*, written in the years 1932-34.

extensive dilapidation of the portrayed universe. Hence the popularity of this mode with the writers of apocalyptic literature.

Being 'a kind of twentieth-century incarnation of neo-classicism' (Carleton 1994:992)³⁷ socialist realism rejected the grotesque also on purely aesthetic grounds. Socialist realism demanded 'precision, clarity and sonority of the words that go to form the pictures, characters and ideas of a book' and rejected words that are 'empty and ugly' (Gorky in Parkhomenko and Myasnikov 1971:32-33). The discord of these postulates with the requirements of the grotesque is immediately apparent – the grotesque refuses to promote an aesthetic differentiation between beautiful and ugly, finding both equally valid, whether in linguistics or in life in general. As Ruskin, known to scholars of the grotesque as the author of *The Stones of Venice*, put it: 'Beauty deprived of its proper foils and adjuncts ceases to be enjoyed as beauty, just as light deprived of all shadows, ceases to be enjoyed as light' (in Clayborough 1965:47). Linguistic purity – in some cases, linguistic sterility³⁸ – was highly commendable in socialist realist writing, while the constraints were put not only on vulgarisms but also on any manifestation of linguistic experimentation. Everything that smacked of Formalism was politically dangerous and by the nineteen-thirties, 'Formalism was stigmatised as vicious ideological sabotage', notes Erlich (1994:276). The linguistic policy applied to Soviet literature during the nineteen-thirties drew a witty but apposite comment from him:

(Though the point was ostensibly to make a literary work intelligible to the masses, the masses did not determine its readability. The standard was set by their self-appointed spokesmen, the *apparatchiks*). An astute wag³⁹ once defined socialist-realist literature as the glorification of the Soviet system in a language which the bureaucrats could understand. (1994:276, parentheses in original)

³⁷ G. Carleton, 'Genre in Socialist Realism', *Slavic Review*, 53(4), 1994:992.

³⁸ The case with Gorky's criticism of Panferov's novel *Bruski* in *Pravda* (28/1/1934) illustrates the point (Kemp-Welch 1991:103). See also 'Debate on Doctrine' in *ibid.*, 1991.

³⁹ The context does not indicate who this might be.

While socialist realists were requested to give their readers a straightforward portrayal of life and unequivocally satisfy their quest for truth, writers of the grotesque put in doubt the existence of the ideal truth. The writers of the grotesque always relied on their readers to complete the act of creation, to establish their own truth, to individually decode the message concealed in the grotesquely incongruous universe of their work. Thus, apart from the fact that it was inconceivable officially to reflect the Soviet reality as incongruous, an emphatic behest was directed at writers to reckon with the readership (see Ermolaev 1963:188). As early as 1921 the call for art to be intellectually accessible to the uneducated masses was sounded in *Pravda*: 'Give us art accessible to the simple eye and simple common sense'.⁴⁰ The writer of socialist realist literature was obliged to convey the events portrayed in his work in such a way that readers, especially those uneducated, were presented with a comprehensible world, qualified through familiar and unequivocal categories of right and wrong. Here again the unsuitability of the grotesque is evident, for it frequently replaces 'a simple eye' with a magnifying glass and, derisively defying 'common-sense', it insists on emphasising the complexity and the incomprehensibility of human existence. The grotesque demands an intelligent, penetrating mind that is eager to search for truths along with the writer and beyond the limitations of common sense. Thus, where the socialist realist had to adopt a patronising attitude towards the reader, the writer of the grotesque would confront readers with unending challenges, forcing them to intellectual endeavour of completing the process of creation by enriching the interpretation of the text with their own experience of life. The grotesque thus not only requires from the reader 'developed aesthetic taste', as Mann puts it (1966:132), but also a considerable intellectual effort. Otherwise grotesque work would remain a meaningless, obscure and useless creation.

⁴⁰ *Дайте нам искусство, доступное простому глазу и простому здравому смыслу.* The words were spoken in defence of the *Gosizdat* (the state publishing agency which also played the role of official censor) and its refusal to publish Mayakovsky's satirical play *Misterium Buff*, hence the title of the article *Довольно Маяковщины*, 'Enough of Mayakovsky'. This information is given in Янгфельдт, *Любовь -это сердце всего*. Москва, 1991:204.

There was only one artistic category in which the grotesque was permitted, although not encouraged. That category was satire. But satire itself was assigned a very restricted field of operation. Its objectives were defined as the struggle of the new with the old, a fight against the remnants of capitalism both in the life and in the consciousness of people, a fight against the remnants of bourgeois ideology (Elsberg 1954:6).⁴¹ Soviet satirists were obliged to juxtapose these targets with the positive characteristic of a new man (6), in the firm belief that life will change for the better (13), the belief in the unequivocal victory of Communism (17). To make the distinction between the old and the new, evil and good, negative and positive absolutely clear, satirical works were regarded as best when written in a manner of straightforward empirical realism, while all the attempts to 'depart from the truth of life, from realism' were branded as false and damaging to Soviet literature (18). In his study *The Power of Satire* Robert Elliot aptly evaluates the situation of the Soviet satire:

It is a harrowing occupational hazard [to be a satirist]. Under extreme conditions, satire against the reigning order is out of the question; so canonical is the rule that political analysts use the amount and character of satire permitted in the Soviet Union as an indication of the relative intensity or relaxation of pressures there at any given time. (1970:262-263)⁴²

Even this brief summary of the relationship of the grotesque and socialist realism leads to the conclusion that writers in the Soviet Union could not use the grotesque mode freely in their works. The grotesque not only contradicted the dogma of socialist literature but it also contradicted its clean-cut, almost puritanical aesthetic requirements. And while socialist realistic work is meant to be aware of its own ideal form, the grotesque is constantly destined to doubt its own artistic identity.

⁴¹ *Наследие Гоголя и Щедрина и советская сатира*. Москва, 1954.

⁴² *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton, 1970.

The Formal Properties of the Grotesque

The prevailing modern view is that the grotesque as a mode of expression has existed in art and literature as long as human consciousness but, being capable of changing its domain and scope while shifting from one meaning to another, it has adapted to the varying demands of different socio-cultural formations to express themselves. In the widest sense, the purpose of grotesque work is to highlight the contradictions inherent in life and in people, and to make the reader aware of the absurdities in the real world. Because the grotesque in itself is a departure from the norm, it is frequently used in satire to expose the immediate and identifiable vices and follies of human beings. It also frequently features in sombre catastrophist literature in which it comments on the universal dilapidation of the world; it depicts the world's physical decrepitude, it reveals the anonymity of individual suffering, emphasises the loneliness of a human being living in the hostile jungle of a modern metropolis. It also exposes the essence of evil in humankind: depravity, corruption, hatred, and the malicious misappropriation of intellect for cunning and deceit. In extreme cases of pessimism or misanthropy, the grotesque renders a philosophical comment on the total absurdity and futility of life. Because of its particular complexity and tendency to constant mutation, the grotesque has not been unequivocally defined even though its existence has been acknowledged for many centuries. It appears from the preceding summary of the understanding of the concept that, in order to identify the grotesque, not one but several of its characteristics have to be simultaneously present in a work or in an aspect of it.

In his seminal study of the grotesque in English literature, Clayborough suggests that grotesque work may be assessed from the 'three complementary points of view: as a reflection of the actual world, as a deliberate artistic device, and as a temperamental peculiarity' of the author.⁴³ A somewhat different approach is made by Kayser who notes that apart from being viewed in a work of art, the grotesque may be examined either as an

⁴³ Clayborough (1965:58-59) derives his argument from G. K. Chesterton's study *Robert Browning* (1903).

aspect of the creative process which includes the artist's own perception of the world, or in the process of the reception of the work by its reader (1981:273). Although in the course of analysing the grotesque work, referring to all those aspects is usually unavoidable, the most tangible evidence of the presence of the grotesque lies in the work itself, that is, in the artistic devices used by the author both to convey his perception of the world and to affect the reader's reception of it.

The first step in attempting the analysis of the grotesque work is to recognise it as such. In Ludmila Foster's view:

We call a literary work 'grotesque' when it produces upon us an effect of something distorted, absurd, incongruous, or estranged; when something is presented to us not only as different from what it is, or from what it might be, but is also presented in a way which does not fit our familiar logical or imaginative pattern. (1966:75)⁴⁴

In her definition of the grotesque Foster focuses on the presentation of the world or the events *in* the work examined as well as on the effect this presentation has on us.⁴⁵ In her subsequent essay on the grotesque, Foster advises to look both at the work's 'substance' and its 'treatment'. She defines substance as "“what is being told”", and treatment as "“how something is being told”", concluding that either one or both of these aspects of the work 'can be affected by the devices of distortion and shift' (1967:38).⁴⁶

One of the most important aspects of the grotesque is the nature of its universe. The universe of the grotesque work 'is and is not our own' notes Kayser (1981:37). His formulation points at the two equally important elements, namely the 'real' and the

⁴⁴ 'The Grotesque: A Method of Analysis', *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*. IX(1), 1966:75-81.

⁴⁵ Formulating, as he puts it, 'basic definition of the grotesque' Thomson reaches similar conclusion, saying that it is '*the unresolved clash of incompatibilities in work and response*' (1972:27; emphasis in original)

⁴⁶ 'A Configuration of the Non-Absolute: The Structure and the Nature of the Grotesque' *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*. IX(2), 1967:38-45.

‘unreal’, which are forced by the artist to coexist in the universe of his work as an undivided entity, leading to total confusion between reality and fantasy. The notion of ‘real’ seems to be easier to grasp as it refers to commonplace situations and to phenomena that are tangible and verifiable by the senses, provided that we allow a certain margin for subjectivity. The concept of ‘unreal’ is vast and can at times be synonymous with ‘ideal’ or with more relevance to the concept of the grotesque notions of fantastic, invented, dreamlike, illusory or fictitious. If used in the sense of ‘untrue’, the ‘unreal’ means fake or fraudulent, implying a certain trickery and manipulation with reality – its deliberate deformation. Kayser’s statement that the grotesque world ‘is and is not our own’ means that we can talk about the grotesque universe only when various realms fuse and mingle freely, preventing the reader from distinguishing real from unreal. Frequently such a universe seems both ludicrous and hostile as it is populated with strange creatures whose origins and identity are uncertain, concealed or multiplied in endless reflections of the same moral depravity or spiritual emptiness.

Grotesque work frequently reflects the world that is real, but it defamiliarises that world by drastically altering its proportions and perspectives. This deliberate fusion of realms may take place on various levels and may affect various aspects of the text, depending on the defamiliarisation technique chosen by the writer. The real, historically verifiable world may be invested with fantastic events, the law of statics may be suspended, meaning that inanimate objects move freely while people and animals are denied freedom of movement. The deliberate confusion of realms may affect the whole universe of the work or only its selected aspects, allowing the abolition of generic categories – people, animals and objects share parts and characteristics, preventing the reader from unequivocally identifying them. The real world may be colonised by people and other creatures whose natural sizes and shapes are ludicrously distorted, thus perceived as grotesque. It may also happen that the shapes and sizes are retained intact, yet they completely lose the essence of creatures or objects with which they are commonly associated.

The most potent grotesque images are those which manipulate our perception of a human being. Thus the human body retains all its ‘real characteristics’ but is no more than an

empty shell completely devoid of inner humanness. Hence the particular popularity of puppets, marionettes and automatons with the writers of the grotesque. Thomson explains the essence of their grotesqueness: 'Human-like, animated yet actually lifeless objects, they are apt to be simultaneously comical and eerie – comical because of their imperfect approximation to human form and behaviour, eerie probably because of age-old, deep-rooted fears in man of animated and human-like objects' (1972:35). Whether heterogenic, composed by synthetising elements belonging to different realms, or heteromorphic, that is rooted in disproportion, all the grotesque forms are always polyvalent, incongruous and disquieting, always thwarting an unequivocal distinction between phenomena that are *normally* considered antagonistic.

Grotesque work displays both the extent and the nature of the departure from the model or from the norm. This may be realised intrinsically in the text, or extrinsically, in the process of juxtaposition of 'the author's presentation and the reader's familiar frame of reference' (Foster 1967:41). Whichever is the case, the grotesque presents a universe that is extravagant: its features and images are either exaggerated or altered in some extreme way. This concerns all aspects of grotesque work, including the logic which organises the narrative. The latter may be based on a minor incident blown out of all proportion and presented as great tragedy. It may also present genuine tragedy as an insignificant or even laughable event. Similar incongruity may affect the reasoning of individual characters, conveyed, however, as normal, logical and the only possible. Confronting this reasoning with his own, the reader is thrown into an instant emotional turmoil and loses confidence in the universe thus created. Together with the author he might even doubt the possibility of ever being able to restore harmony and reason in his own world.

Closely related to the above is the tonality of the grotesque work. An important observation about the mechanisms by which the grotesque triggers this specific reaction is made by Mc Elroy, who maintains that the grotesque is invested with 'perverse glee', an element of play whose 'purpose is not merely to titillate by rendering laughable things which we know we really should not laugh at (though some portion of that forbidden pleasure is usually involved)'. In his view, 'the commonplace sentiments of revulsion and

pity' are pushed aside by a grimly grotesque joke which initially seems to divert our attention from the terrible or pathetic aspects of life but which eventually strikes us by jarring our emotions, for 'the horrible becomes vivid precisely because we are not called upon for a conventional response' (1989:20). And it is the reader's 'response' the grotesque seeks, to capture his attention and to upset the comfort of his petty-bourgeois lifestyle. By its extraordinary nature the belligerent grotesque work precalculates a certain quality and intensity of emotional response. 'We are both fascinated and repelled by the grotesque', notes Clayborough (1965:73), while Kayser explains: 'we smile at the deformations, but are appalled by the horrible and the monstrous elements as such' (1981:31). Harpham puts it more directly: 'grotesque forms in fact almost always inspire an ambivalent emotional reaction' (1982:8). Clayborough, Harpham, Kayser, Thomson, Mc Elroy and many other critics exploring the issue define the reader's response to the grotesque in terms of shock, confusion, mixed reaction, unresolved clash, or an overall disturbing quality. In Kayser's view, 'we are so strongly affected and terrified by the grotesque images because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world' (1981:184). The reader's reaction to a grotesque work is similar to the reaction to our own image in a crooked mirror: we know that we are looking at ourselves, but the image which looks back at us evokes simultaneously laughter, revulsion, and even horror.

From the aesthetic point of view, the grotesque work violently resists the classical concept of beauty, order and harmony, introducing what is uniquely its own, based on ambivalence, incongruity and the strange co-existence of inherently incompatible elements. But the grotesque 'is not what is hideous, monstrous, ugly, repulsive' warns Harpham, emphasising that it is only if such elements are in an interaction with their opposites (1982:5). Inevitably, the grotesque confuses or even completely shatters our own value system; what to us is insignificant is presented as significant, what is trivial is awarded undue recognition, while what we consider holy is placed amidst mundane banality or even obscenity. Thus, what was said about the aesthetic code being affected by the grotesque applies also to the ethical attributes of the universe created, for by its very essence the

grotesque undermines concepts such as ideal justice, elevated wisdom, eternal happiness and an orderly universe.

A lot has been said about the grotesque capacity to emphasise and to expose, but it is equally important to note that the grotesque has as much potential to expose as it has the potential to hide, to be used as a disguise for the ‘other’ meaning. In respect of the authors, it does not only reflect their ‘temperamental peculiarity’ but it also betrays their attitude to the ‘actual world’, since it may mirror their personal confusion and anxiety. On the other hand, we never are certain what the authors’ views are. They seldom speak directly to the reader but rather choose the text of their grotesque work as a mask. This grotesque indeterminacy does not only absolve them from being censured for the nonsense and absurdity plaguing their work, but also prevents them from being cast into a definite ethical, philosophical or ideological pattern. The grotesque work is a work of the rebellious mind that in the process of bold recreation of the familiar world disregards accepted laws of probability and plausibility. The author of the grotesque is an individualist who appropriates the right to have an individual vision of the world, but might choose to conceal it in the intricate net of other views and voices which constantly echo in the work.

As a robust and versatile literary device, the grotesque attracts the reader’s attention because it deviates from expectations of the usual and familiar. That is why the grotesque work clashes with dogmatic establishments, encourages polemic and points at the possibility to holding a different opinion from the one officially imposed. Although traditionally the grotesque world was partially attributed to the intervention of supernatural forces, the authors of modern grotesques make a profoundly ironic statement that in the modern world we do not need the devil to inflict harm; human beings themselves are perfectly capable of making this world resemble Hell. But if the grotesque work is to achieve its full impact, it has to make the reader believe that there is a specific purpose and a message in the inexplicable oddity of its universe. If readers thought the work a mere caricature or burlesque of reality, a product of extravagance or of traumatised mind, they would feel no involvement, no need to take seriously the situation put before them.

PART II

THE GROTESQUE IN BRUNO JASIEŃSKI'S WORKS

It is not as the creating, but as the seeing man, that we are here contemplating the master of true grotesque. It is because the dreadfulness of the universe around him weighs upon his heart that his work is wild; and therefore through the whole of it we shall find the evidence of deep insight into nature.

(Ruskin: *The Stones of Venice*)

INTRODUCTION

With the hundredth anniversary of Jasieński's birth pending in 2001, critical literature devoted to him is still eclectic and divided according to the place of his residence. Although he lived in Poland, France (1924-1929) and the Soviet Union (1929-1937), scholars usually speak of two periods, considering the works written in France to be firmly rooted in Jasieński's Polish experience. Critical studies by Polish scholars as a rule focus on the Polish period, considering it vibrant and enticing, particularly because of the artist's eagerness to experiment with language and image. Those critical works which examine Jasieński's contribution to Polish literature either focus on him as the sole subject or investigate his work in the wider context of the epoch and its literary currents. Among the most interesting studies of Jasieński's Polish works are those done by Marian Rawiński and Edward Balcerzan. Rawiński's doctoral thesis 'Twórczość Brunona Jasieńskiego of Futuryzmu do okresu Paryskiego'¹ evolves around Jasieński's Futurist poetry and his two major works, written and published in France: the poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela* and the novel *I Burn Paris*. Almost concurrently with Rawiński's pioneering study, another one was undertaken by Balcerzan, who subsequently published it as *Styl i poetyka twórczości dwujęzycznej Brunona Jasieńskiego*.² While Rawiński is interested in Jasieński's artistic development, Balcerzan's semiotic study thoroughly examines the poet's use of language and the effect it had on his numerous translations from Russian.

It should be noted that both the Polish and the Soviet research of Jasieński and his works was possible only after the artist's official rehabilitation in 1956. The underlying purpose of Soviet scholarship was to substantiate the claim that Jasieński was unjustly purged because he had always been a true proletarian writer, fervently supporting the October Revolution and its ideals. The works by Chernysheva, Davshan and Khoroshukhin aand

¹ 'The Art of Bruno Jasieński from Futurism to his Parisian Period'. Unpublished, 1968.

² 'Style and Poetic of the Bilingual Art of Bruno Jasieński'. Wrocław, 1968.

Pruttsev³ aim to prove that Jasieński adopted socialist realism as an exclusive method for all his prose written after 1929. Significant here is the Soviet scholars' emphatic interest in the novel *Man Changes His Skin*. The novel, published in 1932 in the prominent Soviet literary journal *Novy mir* was hailed as an exemplary socialist realistic novel by none other than 'the father of socialist realism', Maxim Gorky himself (Stern 1969:202). It earned Jasieński exceptional popularity among Soviet readers, indicative of which are the novel's six mass editions between 1956 and 1960 after its author's rehabilitation (see Pruttsev 1974:163).

There are four monographs devoted to Jasieński and his writings. The author of the first monograph *Bruno Jasieński*, the Polish poet Anatol Stern, knew Jasieński personally and shared his youthful fascination with Futurism. Stern's ambition is to pinpoint the objective motivations for the choices his generation had to make, thus motivating their leftist sympathies.⁴ Stern does not spare Jasieński harsh criticism when it comes to his ideological fanaticism, bordering on aberration⁵. Nevertheless, upholding the view that Jasieński was

³ Т. А. Чернышева, 'О романе Бруно Ясенского *Человек меняет кожу*.' *Труды Иркутского унив. им. Жданова*. Иркутск 1959(28), pp. 121-146; Е. М. Хорошухин, 'Проблема борьбы двух миров в незаконченном романе Ясенского *Заговор равнодуши-ных*.' *Труды Самаркандинского унив. Самарканд*, 1963(123), pp. 35-43; Е. М. Хорошухин, 'Художественная проза Бруно Ясенского.' Диссертация: Ленинградский пед. инст. им. Герцена. Ленинград, 1969; Б. И. Прутцев, 'К вопросу о романе Бруно Ясенского *Человек меняет кожу*.' *Ученые записки Орловского госуд. унив. Орлов*, 1963(19), pp. 125-174; Б. И. Прутцев, *Бруно Ясенский: Очерк творчества*. Rzeszów: WSP, 1974. А. Н. Давшан, 'Антифашистская тема в творчестве Бруно Ясенского.' *Научные труды Ташкентского унив. Ташкент*. 1975(396), pp. 3-25.

⁴ Warszawa, 1969.

⁵ For example, Stern discusses Jasieński's little known stage adaptation of his own poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela*. The adaptation was made for the workers' theatre in France and later published in the Soviet Union as *Rzecz Gromadzka* ('Res District'). According to Stern, in order to make his play more ideologically explicit, Jasieński changed his stanzas, 'animated by a mysterious lyrical magic' into scenes which evoked 'shock, protest and occasionally even horror'. What had been in the original a depiction of the legitimate struggle of peasants against their oppressors, here became methodical and cruel extermination, Stern maintains. According to the stage directions, peasants are shown rejoicing at killing their oppressors. 'Laughter, screams, chanting and music' is heard behind the scenes which Stern finds not only unnecessary and artistically unconvincing, but also morally harmful (1969:118-125).

‘an advocate of the Revolution and the symbol of a man who devoted to the cause [of Communism] not only his art but also his life’, Stern considers Jasieński’s ‘superhuman love for people’ the main driving force in determining his fate (1969:236-237). Elaborating on Jasieński’s personality, Stern draws a balanced picture of ‘the immensely talented artist’ who had the ‘integrity to stand for himself and for others’ while acting ‘in full consciousness of his great calling as a writer’ (*ibid.*:237). His study becomes disappointing, though, when it comes to Jasieński’s writing, the analysis of which is limited to a brief general comment.

The second Polish monograph, that by Dziarnowska (1982) reiterates Stern’s views on humanism as the driving force behind Jasieński’s political choices. She is less adamant, though, when it comes to Jasieński’s adoption of socialist realism as his sole creative method, believing that Jasieński in many ways remained faithful to his earlier views about the artist’s right to formal experiment and freedom in choosing his own means of expression. Unfortunately, Dziarnowska’s book is written for the general public, which permits her to avoid quoting sources, to omit the names of the addressees of Jasieński’s correspondence, and even to skip an occasional date. Although her work is true to the factual data traceable in various other sources, the writing convention she chooses does not inspire the confidence a scholar has in the more academically presented studies. Nevertheless, because of the still limited access to the information on Jasieński’s life, her book was consulted on several occasions.

An emphasis on the ideological profile of Jasieński distinguishes Boris Pruttsev’s study in the fulfilment of the *kandidat nauk* degree at Lenin’s Pedagogical Institute in Moscow, published in 1974 (concurrently published also in Rzeszów, Poland). To the best of our knowledge his *Бруно Ясенский: Очерк творчества* (‘Bruno Yasensky: Outline of His Work’) is the only monograph on Jasieński in Russian. The highly ideological rhetoric of this monograph satisfied the requirements of Soviet literary criticism but was clearly to the detriment of an objective analysis of Jasieński’s works. Pruttsev maintains that the period after Jasieński came to the Soviet Union was for him ‘not only the period of his maturity as an artist, but was also the period of his ideological growth’; these were the years –

Pruttsev continues – ‘of [Jasieński’s] formation as a Soviet writer’ (1974:159). It is highly questionable whether this assessment adequately captures Jasieński’s development in the Soviet Union, since a number of the writer’s important works, namely *The Ball of the Mannequins* and his short stories written during the years 1935-1936, are not considered by Pruttsev as worthy of his attention. The value of his work thus rests on the exceptionally thorough bibliographical index consisting of 280 entries, 126 of which are publications of Jasieński’s works, articles, essays and book reviews which might one day be used as a point of departure for compilers of a complete edition of Jasieński’s writing.⁶

The fourth existing monograph is in English; here credit goes to Nina Kolesnikoff, whose study *Bruno Jasieński: His Evolution from Futurism to Socialist Realism* was published in Canada in 1982. Although the approach of this book is less ideologically explicit, particularly in the chapters discussing Jasieński’s Polish period (to which she devotes two-thirds of her book), Kolesnikoff’s study concludes on a note similar to that of Pruttsev’s, namely that Jasieński travelled on ‘a difficult path of ideological and creative development from Futurism to socialist realism’.⁷ Even though Kolesnikoff admits to the grotesque character of some of Jasieński’s works – see the chapter ‘The Elements of the Grotesque in *The Ball of the Mannequins* and *The Nose*’ – she focuses exclusively on the satiric function of the grotesque, repeatedly stressing that this device is ‘subordinated to didactic purposes’ (1982:85) and applied ‘only to condemn the evils of the capitalist system’ (ibid.:124). Kolesnikoff’s own understanding of the grotesque, based on that of Wolfgang Kayser (1981), prevents her from seeing the full potential of the grotesque for an innovative interpretation of Jasieński’s works. Kayser’s definition favours the uncanny and fantastic, frequently occurring as a result of the demonic intervention into the familiar world, while the case of the grotesque in Jasieński’s works lends itself better to the

⁶ Jasieński’s articles, published initially in the Soviet press, were never reprinted and are available only in archives. Thus Pruttsev has the advantage of access to a number of quotations from these articles, which makes them readily accessible to the wider scholarly community.

⁷ Compare: Kolesnikoff (1982:124-127), and Pruttsev (1974:264-265).

modern interpretation that the grotesque is a product of perception and is born in reaction to the absurdities and chaos of life.

Obviously the highly politicised circumstances of Jasieński's life, particularly after he left Poland, are to be blamed for inadequacies in the objective assessment of his work. There is still considerable scope for further study which would de-codify the myths surrounding his biography and his devotion to the Communist ideology, while his works, particularly those written in the Soviet Union, need to be re-examined in an objective manner, free from political dictates or personal bias. In the light of the political changes in the region, and the long-awaited opening of the Soviet State Archives, the situation is indeed conducive to such a project. The first step has already been taken by the recent Polish publication of Krzysztof Jaworski's *Bruno Jasieński w sowieckim więzieniu: Aresztowanie, wyrok, śmierć* ('Bruno Jasieński in the Soviet Prison: The Arrest, Conviction and Death').⁸ The book, which consists mainly of official documents and letters written by Jasieński to Soviet officials after his arrest, not only elucidates a number of uncertainties surrounding Jasieński's fate after his arrest, but also provides a chilling account of life under the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union.

It was for political reasons, too, that so little attention was given to Jasieński's use of the grotesque. By virtue of its political and ideological conditioning, socialist realism could not reconcile with the grotesque mode in art, so there is little wonder that Soviet scholars insisted on the realistic character of Jasieński's works. Capitalising on the ideological message, they showed no interest in his major grotesque works like *The Ball of the Mannequins* and his short stories.⁹ Polish scholars who frequently acknowledged this

⁸ Kielce. WSP, 1995.

⁹ For instance, in a monograph nearly three hundred pages long, Pruttsev has only one sentence in which he mentions *The Ball of the Mannequins*. The sentence reads as follows: 'Before the novel *Man Changes His Skin*, [Jasieński] created a grotesque play *The Ball of the Mannequins*, published several essays, articles and literary reviews' (1974:155). The case is similar in regard to Jasieński's short stories, written in the years 1935-36, in which where the grotesque features prominently. Although Pruttsev's neatly-cut portrayal of Jasieński as an exemplary revolutionary writer and realist holds better without these works, his approach inevitably leads to a one-sided

device in Jasieński's earlier works failed to define or to analyse it comprehensively. Most critics readily acknowledge Jasieński's use of 'the grotesque poetics' to ridicule certain phenomena of contemporary life,¹⁰ while only a few are willing to refer to the grotesque elements in Jasieński's poetry in a context other than satirical. Edward Balcerzan, for instance, in his Introduction to Bruno Jasieński's *Utwory poetyckie. Manifesty. Szkice*. ('Poems. Manifestos. Sketches.') identifies the source of the grotesque in some of Jasieński's works (*The Legs of Izolda Morgan*, *The Nose*, *The Ball of the Mannequins*) in "overloading" the work with the Futuristic consciousness', resulting in an expressionistic effect (in Jasieński 1972:LV). Interested in the formal aspects of art, Balcerzan mentions the grotesque in Jasieński's poems on several occasions, associating it with 'an inherent incompatibility and ambivalence' (ibid: LXII), with 'demonic and grotesque vision' (ibid.:LVIII), and identifying the fantastic with the grotesque (ibid.:LVII), but stopping short of interpreting the significance of the use of the grotesque by Jasieński for fuller understanding of his art. Although the remarks made by Balcerzan are true, including his view that 'the grotesque is born when one realizes the stereotype' (ibid.:LXI), they are valid only if defined and elucidated further, since not each case of incompatibility or ambivalence warrants the presence of the grotesque, while the 'demonic' element in Jasieński's world view is, at best, questionable.

In his article 'Słowo o Jakubie Szeli wobec folkloru' Rawiński identifies several instances of the grotesque device in Jasieński's poem, mainly those that fit into the Bakhtinian concept of carnival.¹¹ Because he is primarily interested in the links between *The Lay of Jakub Szela* and Slavonic folklore, Rawiński is less concerned with assigning specific significance to the grotesque elements for the poem's interpretation. We find a more thorough analysis of the grotesque in Jasieński's works in Sergiusz Stern-Wachowiak's

picture of an artist obsessed with ideology, unquestionably accepting the Communist dogma and the reality which comes with it.

¹⁰ See for example, M. Stępien, *Bruno Jasieński*. Warszawa-Kraków, 1974:32.

¹¹ 'The Lay of Jakub Szela against the Folklore' *Pamiętnik Literacki*. Vol. LXII(z.1), 1971:81-118.

‘sketches’ about Futurism, entitled *Miąższ zakazanych owoców: Jankowski, Jasieński, Grędziński*.¹² Discussing Polish Futurism, Sterna-Wachowiak singles out Jasieński for his stylistic achievements in poetry which subsequently earned him a number of followers (1985:59, 84). Sterna-Wachowiak, in principle agreeing with Balcerzan’s opinions discussed earlier, describes Jasieński’s use of artistic devices in terms of ‘Gulliverism’. He explains the concept as a stylistic convention, born out of the supremacy of matter over spirit (65) and which mostly affects the character of metaphor used by new art (72). In essence, Sterna-Wachowiak’s concept of Gulliverism operates in a way identical to the device of the grotesque, and its primary objective is to create a poetic universe which substantially differs from the one perceived as familiar. He derives the term from a sum of techniques employed by Swift in his novel *Gulliver’s Travels*, such as expressing abstract concepts in terms of concrete objects, transforming the universe through the ‘poetic elephantiasis’ – the artificial exaggeration of normal dimensions (hyperbolisation), or by the ‘lilliputisation’ – reducing dimensions to proportions no longer acceptable as physically verifiable. It also includes the coexistence of objective and subjective realities – placing the descriptions of the familiar world with visions and hallucinations in the same context. The analysis of several of Jasieński’s poems, including *The Lay of Jakub Szela*, leads Sterna-Wachowiak to the conclusion that Jasieński was – like Swift – a writer of the Menippean grotesque, which he explains, by quoting from L. P. Grossman’s book on Dostoevsky,¹³ as an endeavour ‘to introduce the element of the unusual into the thicket of familiar phenomena in order to melt together – in a Romantic mode – the sublime and the grotesque, to imperceptibly alter and bring to the limits of the fantastic events and images of ordinary life’ (in Sterna- Wachowiak 1985:84-85).¹⁴ Although we may argue that

¹² ‘The Pulp of Forbidden Fruits’. Bydgoszcz, 1985.

¹³ *Поэтика Достоевского* (‘Poetics of Dostoevsky’). Москва, 1925.

¹⁴ Although in principle Sterna-Wachowiak’s reasoning permits him to arrive at admissible conclusions regarding the character of Jasieński’s poetry, his use of terminology is somewhat inexact. It may be that Sterna-Wachowiak’s understanding of the grotesque differs from the one accepted in this thesis. His concept of the grotesque coincides with the views of the Soviet scholarship where the grotesque is identified with satire (hence his ‘menippean grotesque’), or with the low as can be gathered from the quote from Grossman (hence the juxtaposition of *wzniósłosć* ‘sublime’ with the grotesque’ (1985:84), whereas our understanding is that in the grotesque the

categorising Jasieński as a 'Gulliverist' and a writer of menippea unnecessarily constrains the scope of Jasieński's grotesque art, Sterna-Wachowiak's observations regarding the 'ambivalent character of a word' in Jasieński's poetry (1985:120) prove that the grotesque played a much more important role in his art than critics and scholars, including Sterna-Wachowiak himself, have often been willing to admit.

sublime is blended with the insignificant). In discussing 'menippea' Bakhtin, to whom Sterna-Wachowiak also refers at this point, relates it to satire not to the grotesque. It can be seen that menippea embraces the grotesque as a device which is well suited to carry on with its many generic requirements. Bakhtin examines fourteen such requirements, emphatically stating the need for 'the organic unity of all these seemingly very heterogeneous features.' (1984a:118) Although Jasieński's works in general can be analysed within the scope of menippea, for they carry many of its characteristics, this seldom applies to a single work, especially to poetry. For the extensive discussion of menippea as a genre see Bakhtin (1984a: 101-180).

CHAPTER III

BRUNO JASIEŃSKI'S CONCEPT OF ART

In his overview of avant-garde in his introduction to the anthology of avant-garde programmes and manifestos, Jaworski names Futurism as the most important amongst the avant-garde movements in Poland (1992:86). Pointing out the need to renew art and find new artistic techniques adequate with reality, Futurists took into account the political, cultural and scientific revolutions currently taking place. The recovery of independence by Poland after a hundred and fifty years of partition and dependence coincided with 'the birth of new social and aesthetic values', as Czyżewski puts it (ibid.:196). The need to create a new aesthetic code consonant with the post-partition situation in the country was widely noted in all intellectual circles regardless of political affiliations. The emphasis was put on contemporaneity. Peiper was saying: 'the prison of history must be destroyed and the current events must be followed'. *Miasto, masa, maszyna* – the city, the crowd, the machine – were named as issues central to the new art. Peiper believed that the rapid urbanisation and change in emphasis from the individual to the socially more powerful crowd, together with rapid industrialisation and technological development, had to 'influence art sooner or later' (ibid.:203).

In literature, avant-garde¹ began with a Futuristic manifesto, published in 1909 in *Le Figaro* (20 February) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (ibid.:24).² One of the central points in the manifesto was its author's belief that the new times should create a 'new aesthetics'

¹ The term 'avant-garde' is used, after Jaworski, as a generic name for artistic movements which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted approximately until the Second World War. However, it must be noted that in Polish criticism the term also applies to a group of poets and writers, including Futurists, gathered around Tadeusz Peiper and his journal *Zwrotnica*. Sometimes this group is referred to as 'Cracow avant-garde' (Jaworski 1992:7).

² Jaworski's anthology of theoretical and critical writing by avant-garde artists is the most recent publication of this nature. In the commentary to this collection of manifestos, programmes and articles, Jaworski gives the genesis and a summary of the avant-garde movements in Poland.

and new concept of beauty, which would take into account 'an aggressive movement, feverish sleeplessness, the pace of a runner, somersault, a cheek and a fist, [...] and beauty of speed' (Marinetti *ibid.*:138). The militant and iconoclastic tone of almost all eleven points of Marinetti's manifesto were echoed by Russian and Polish Futurists.³ Yet apart from the rhetoric, the differences between Marinetti and Russian and Polish Futurists were substantial,⁴ for all three took their starting point from different social, historical and 'civilisational' backgrounds. Speaking of these dissimilarities, scholars usually single out the civilisational gap, namely the technological backwardness of Slavic countries as the important differentiating factor. One may add to it the historical experience and social composition of the societies concerned as equally crucial. This prompted Russian and Polish Futurists to reject the glorification of war⁵ formulated in point nine of Marinetti's manifesto, but fully support revolution as a means to speed up progress in various spheres of life.

The affinity of Jasieński's own views on art with those of avant-garde programmes, discussed earlier in regard to the input of Tadeusz Peiper, is apparent, especially in respect

³ Although some sources, including Jasieński (in *Polish Futurism: A Summary* [1972:223]) maintain that the movement in Poland began in 1914 when Jerzy Jankowski published his poem *Tramwaj wpopszek ulicy* ('Tram across the Street'), the general opinion prevails that the genuine Futurist movement in Poland did not start until 1921 with a number of Futuristic manifestos, written mostly by Bruno Jasieński. The genesis of Russian Futurism dates back to December 1912 when *Пощечина общественному вкусу* ('The Slap in the Face of Public Taste'), a manifesto signed by David Burlyuk, Aleksander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velemir Khlebnikov, was published. The character of Russian Futurism is relevant here because of Jasieński's explicit interest in Mayakovsky at this early stage of his creative career.

⁴ There are a number of works which deal exhaustively with both specifics of Polish Futurism and differences between the Italian, Russian and Polish manifestations of the movement. See: H. Zaworska, *O nową Sztukę, Polskie programy artystyczne lat 1917-1922*. Warszawa, 1963; A. Stern, *Poezja zbuntowana*. Warszawa, 1964; A. Lam, *Polska Avangarda Poetycka. Programy lat 1917-1923*. Kraków, 1968; E. Balcerzan in Jasieński 1972, S. Jaworski 1992. B. Carpenter's study *The Poetic Avant-Garde in Poland: 1918-1913* (1983) provides an exhaustive bibliography on the subject.

⁵ See Marinetti: 'We want to praise war – the only measure of world hygiene, militarism, patriotism, annihilating gesture of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for women' (in Jaworski 1992:139).

of the form of the new art. It has to be emphatically stated, though, that this affinity is not derivative but it has its origins in a process of intellectual cross-pollination. There are documents proving that Jasieński's opinion was respected by even older and more experienced friends, like Peiper himself. Sterna-Wachowiak quotes Peiper saying 'what we have in common with Jasieński is not Futurism, but the fact that, amongst our young poets, he is the one who is the closest to my concept of the contemporaneous art and can express it as no one else can' (1985:64). But Jasieński did not aspire to any position of authority, and, as has already been noted, he eventually admitted that Futurism was for him a 'personal affair' (1972:234). Writing a summary of the movement he wrote his personal account of it: 'I did not write the history of Futurism, I wrote history of **my** Futurism' (ibid.:237; bold in original). Jasieński's manifestos appeared in print between March and April 1921; *Exposé to Nogi Izoldy Morgan* ('Exposé' to 'The Legs of Isolda Morgan') was published with the novel in 1923, while *Futurism Polski: Bilans* ('Polish Futurism: A Summary') was published in *Zwrotnika* 1926(6). In that order they appear in the collection of Jasieński's works, published in 1972.⁶

In this chapter, Jasieński's views on art as they emerge from his Futuristic manifestos and other theoretical statements made during his lifetime will be briefly discussed. It will be shown that in essence Jasieński's views on art never changed, and that his 'evolution to socialist realism', as suggested by scholars,⁷ needs to be substantially qualified, for there is no proof that he ever accepted its rigid rejection of artistic innovation and its vulgar attitude to realism. Quite the contrary might be the case, for Jasieński's later views on art,

⁶ *Utwory poetyckie. Manifesty. Szkice*, introduction by Edward Balcerzan. Wrocław. In this chapter further references to this source are indicated by page number only.

⁷ Balcerzan explicitly divides Jasieński's works into two groups: 'The first one we may call *futuristic* [...] that is consisting of texts from *But w butonierce* ('A Shoe in the Buttonhole') to *I Burn Paris* including [Jasieński's] own translation of this novel. The second one we may call *surrealist*; it comprises texts written by Jasieński in Russian: *The Nose*, *The Chief Culprit*, *Man Changes his Skin*, *The Conspiracy of the Indifferent*, and others' (1968:31). Balcerzan's division has been accepted by Kolesnikoff, as seen in the title of her book (1982). Briefly analysing Jasieński's own statements Carpenter writes that 'At the age of twenty [...] Jasieński broke away from the tradition in which he had grown up, and he proposed his own concept of poetry to which he was to remain faithful until the end of his life' (1983:30).

sporadically published in the Soviet press, prove that 'in his artistic spirit' he remained an avant-garde artist. Jasieński embraced socialist realism on the understanding that 'it will be free literature' as Lenin said in 1905, promising that it would promote 'the idea of socialism and sympathy with the working people' (in Parkhomenko and Myasnikov 1971:26). Jasieński's rebellion turned out to be a 'constructive' search for social justice, hence his interest in Communism.⁸ The idea of Communism seemed to guarantee not only the realisation of social postulates, but seemed to offer a haven for art as well. Such a perception was common amongst intellectuals all over the world during the nineteen-twenties and thirties, especially among those who did not have first-hand knowledge of 'real Communism'.⁹ But whether Jasieński was subsequently satisfied with the actual embodiment of his ideals when he became personally exposed to it is a question open to speculation. In support of my view that he became disillusioned, and might even have wanted to back out¹⁰ is the fact of the striking contradiction between his unreserved support for the system in official declarations and the ambivalent character of his works written at the time. These works present a deeply disturbing world, suggesting their author's growing disenchantment if not with Communism itself then certainly with its Stalinist version.

To the best of my knowledge Jasieński never formulated his understanding of the grotesque, although he used the term on several occasions, for instance defining the genre

⁸ Weisgerber maintains that the character and scope of the avant-garde rebellion is significant in that it predetermines the ideological affiliation of the avant-garde artists. He points out that the total rejection of the *status quo* may be either destructive, that is 'nihilistic', or it may be constructive, one which strives toward the ideal of reconstruction, paving the way for formal experimentation and political action (1974:414).

⁹ Compare the active support given to the Communist party by French surrealists (Breton, Eluard, Aragon). Their mouthpiece, *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924-1929), and later *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* (1930-1933) exemplifies it by its socio-political, pro-revolutionary, Marxists content (Jaworski 1992:53-64). Czesław Miłosz gives a frank account of his Communist sympathies in *Rodzinna Europa*. Warszawa, 1990:95-134.

¹⁰ Jasieński allegedly wanted to attend the 1936 Comintern congress 'Writers Defending Culture' in Paris and later to go as a war correspondent to Spain during the civil war. In both cases he was not allowed to leave the Soviet Union (Dziarnowska 1982:495, 523 respectively).

of his play *The Ball of the Mannequins* as 'the grotesque play' (253). Nevertheless, we may assume that he appreciated its potential as a powerful artistic tool, initially in exposing a malicious and oppressive world¹¹ and later in ridiculing its vices. Furthermore, the analysis of his critical writing reveals the kind of creative temperament and such understanding of art that were particularly suited to the grotesque both as a medium and as a technique for the artistic representation of life. His emphasis on the synthetic¹² character of art, on the necessity to invent a new logic to suit the rhythm of modern times,¹³ to rationalise and familiarise modern civilisation through art and to free man's psyche from fear of the machine, to involve public emotionally in the creative process,¹⁴ to provoke them,¹⁵ and to address the issues in an 'economic' way but with a vast capacity for varying interpretations. As far as Jasieński's critical essays are concerned, both their content and form are equally telling when it comes to establishing his interest in the grotesque, for his penchant for this specific artistic method is evident not only in what he said, but even more in how he said it. His pronouncements are radical in tone, they call for violent solutions, they 'attack' the reader visually, confusing intellectual domains of science and art, provoking moral and social convention.

¹¹ See Mc Elroy: 'In depicting a vindictive, persecuting world, the grotesque may be put to several uses [...] ' (1989:17).

¹² See Mc Elroy: '[...] grotesque art, even more than most arts, is synthetic' (1989:16). Mc Elroy's understanding of what it synthetises (magic, animalism, and play) does not adequately reflect the kind of synthetic art present in avant-garde. This is best explained in the essay by Evgeny Zamyatin: 'О синтезизме' ('On Synthetism', 1922) (in *Лица*, New York, 1967). Zamyatin, an engineer by profession but a talented writer by vocation, believed that there are only three 'schools in art': affirmation – thesis (realism, which sees the world with a simple eye); negation – antithesis (symbolism, which turns away from the world); and synthesis, which looks at the world through 'a complex set of lenses' and discovers 'a grotesque, strange multiplicity of worlds' (237), and where bits of these worlds always create one whole. Zamyatin believed that modern art must be synthetic and that the door to this method was opened by Futurists (239).

¹³ See Mc Elroy: 'Logic is replaced by anti-logic, a zany but compelling process in which the forms of reason are used to arrive at absurd or outlandish conclusions' (1989: 28).

¹⁴ See Thomson's view on the emotional impact and the grotesque discussed in Part I.

¹⁵ See Mc Elroy: '[the modern grotesque] attacks the reader and his desire to live in a [reasonable world], shocking his sensibility, reversing conventional values [...] ' (1989:29).

The Years of Futurism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, life ceased to be coherent and logical. Wars, social inequality, the dilapidation of moral values, the inadequacy of religious teachings, but also, on the more tangible level, the development of machines, the invention of the cinema, drastic changes in social life and moral standards – all these factors contributed immensely to the rapid development of grotesque art and they were all noted by Bruno Jasieński. In her book on the poetic avant-garde in Poland, Bogdana Carpenter characterises Jasieński as more mature and less impulsive than his peers, the other young Futurists, and praises him for his ‘critical ability and gift for synthetic thinking’:

He had a very organised, critical mind, and it is not surprising that he was the author of the first history of Polish Futurism [...], whose lucidity, impartiality, and objectivity are striking if one considers that it was written by an active participant of the movement only a year after its last manifestation, and that he was only twenty-two years old. (1983:10)

Jasieński started his ‘theoretical’ career with an address, directed *Do Narodu Polskiego. Manifest w sprawie natychmiastowej futuryzacji życia* (‘To the Polish Nation. Manifesto on the Immediate Futurisation of Life’), where he defined the historical position of Poland and associated with it certain tasks which not only artists but society as a whole were facing.¹⁶ Jasieński wrote about the immense cultural crisis of European civilisation after World War I which had led to radical shifts in political and social structures. He noted that this crisis was particularly strongly felt in Poland, which had emerged after the war from ‘a century and a half of political slavery’. During the years of partition the cultural consciousness of Poles could not develop as freely as was the case in the West. In Poland, the whole national energy had to focus on ‘the arduous and toilsome [*żmudnej i mozolnej*] struggle to retain language and national identity’ – he noted. He praised Polish art, especially that produced during the age of Romanticism, for reflecting this struggle, for being ‘deeply national, [...] written with the sap and blood [*sokiem i krwią*] of turbulent

¹⁶ In Jasieński (1972:198-210); henceforth abbreviated to *To the Polish Nation...*

life itself', and this saved it from being 'pure art' created for its own sake. He praised Polish Romantic poets for responding to 'the pulse and the cry of the day' (199).

Much has been said about the Futurists' categorical rejection of 'old art'. While many of their statements were made in a militant tone, almost all Futurists related in one way or another to the artistic achievements of the past. Jasieński, too, emphatically denounced art of the past, but it should be stressed that it is difficult not to see the logic behind his clearly motivated argument. The chief reasons for his *rejection* – not condemnation – of the old art was its lack of relevance and at the same time lack of means to deal with the dramatic 'shift in values' after the war (198), as he put it in the quoted manifesto. In fact, most of his writing at the beginning of the nineteen-twenties shows that he was captivated by what was happening around him and by the effect the rapid civilisational changes were having on his contemporary generation. Jasieński was acutely aware of the fact that the 'accelerated rhythm of contemporary life' replaced mundane reality and its predictable logic. That art must reflect this change was his firm belief. Each new phase in a society's development required new forms of art (224-225).

Futurism in Jasieński's view was not a poetic school but a 'specific form of consciousness, a psychological state' (237) which art had to grasp. A 'modern man', with whom Jasieński obviously identified, needed 'strong and healthy food, [and] new, distinct, synthetic thrills'. In the ever-changing modern world art must be an 'all-penetrating, mind-blowing surprise' (204). Even though Jasieński explicitly accepts reality as fundamental to art, he considers the latter an important element in the cycle of life: being born of experience, art should be used to 'impregnate' life with new ideas and shape the future. As he put it metaphorically: 'A work of art is an extract. Dissolved in a cup of daily life, it should colour it with its own dye' (212). Rejecting the concept of 'art for the art's sake' and 'art as an absolute' (203), Jasieński believed that 'art is part of life, its pulse and its organic function' (198), expecting it to act as an inseminating, nourishing and purifying agent.

To be complete, the definition of the role of art in modern times had to be extended by stipulating the means at its disposal, which would make accomplishing its proper role

possible. Jasieński demanded that to be effective modern art must be synthetic and concise, must be ‘served in capsules’. Why? Because everything is very expensive including printing materials, the poet says. Time is expensive too, and considering the busy life-style of modern man, it is also scarce. Irony and the extravagant tone of his explanation aside, there is a genuine concern on Jasieński’s part that the ever-increasing pace of modern life might considerably reduce the time available for culture. This prompted him to reject voluminous nineteenth-century psychological novels as ‘irrelevant’. In his opinion modern art must not reflect the ‘anatomy of soul’, nor should it serve as a platform for spiritual or philosophical discourses. He also rejected memoirs and accounts of the intimate life of authors, finding them boring and relevant only to the artist’s close family circle or his female admirers. Authors who might have difficulty in following these instructions were advised to pay more attention to ‘sport, sex and science’ (214). The modern work of art must not comfort or appease the reader, he pronounced (203), but it must be ‘like daily bread, deeply topical and accessible’ (215). It must cherish ‘life in its constant strenuous mutation, [it must cherish] the movement, the mob, the sewage system and the City’ (214).

In the same way as he calls upon scientists to develop new, unheard-of designs, he expects his fellow artists to create only new works of art: ‘Art is creating new things. [...] Every artist is obliged to create a completely new, exceptional art, and only then may he give it his name’ (211). A work of art is a ‘concrete and physical thing’ with an ‘iron construction’ which will provide for economy of means – ‘minimum material and maximum dynamics’ (212). To change the outdated and ‘unbearable logic’ of mundane life, artists must create their own auto-logic. Only when freed from ‘monstrous logicality’, will life become ‘a ballet of possibilities and unforeseeable events’ (203). The radical tone of his recommendations was paralleled by the provocative style of the manifestos:

Odwieczne kategorie logiczne, zgodnie z którymi po pojęciu A zawsze nastąpić musi pojęcie B, a one w sumie nieuniknienie dadzą C – stają się nie do wytrzymania. Matematyczne $2 \times 2 = 4$ rozrasta się do rozmiarów upiornego polipa, który nad wszystkim rozpostarł swoje maki. (1972:204)

The primordial categories of logic, according to which notion A is always followed by a notion B, both inevitably leading to C, became unbearable. The mathematic equation $2 \times 2 = 4$ expands to the size of a ghastly polyp which spreads its tentacles all over.

He continued in the same vein in the *Manifest w sprawie poezji futurystycznej* ('Manifesto on Futuristic Poetry'):

Przekreślamy logikę jako mieszczańsko-burżuazyjną formę umysłu. Każdy artysta ma prawo i jest obowiązany stworzyć własną autologicę. Za zasadnicze cechy każdej poszczególnej logiki uważamy:

błyskawiczne kojarzenie rzeczy pozornie dla logiki mieszczańskiej od siebie odległych; dla skrótu drogi pomiędzy dwoma szczytami – skok przez próżnię (1972:212-213; bold in original)

We delete logic as a petty-bourgeois frame of mind. Every artist has a right, and an obligation, to create his own auto-logic. The fundamental characteristics of such a logic in our view are:

the immediate association of things, apparently incompatible, in petty-bourgeois logic; for the short cut between two concepts – a jump through the vacuum, and *salto mortale*.

Believing that modern art must reflect the needs of its own time and respond to the demands of modern life, he had to define its unique parameters. He singled out three 'basic moments of contemporaneity': machine, democracy and crowd (202). In other words, Jasieński considered technological advancement and political and social changes to be the major factors that shaped the life of his generation. By extension, these were in his view the main topics for artists to consider in their works.

At this stage in Jasieński's life democracy meant democratic art, that is, art created for people and by people (203-204). Everyone should have access to art, for which reason it has to be universally available: 'Artists go to the streets' (203) and 'Everybody can be an artist' (204) epitomise Jasieński's idea of democratic art and betray his youthful optimism and enthusiasm. The irony is that in this respect the Futurists, Jasieński included, failed dismally – their work was difficult and of little interest to the masses, a fact that was pointed out to them by several critics.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the issue of democratic – that is accessible art – was important for Jasieński; thus when in 1923 he admitted 'I am no longer a Futurist' (223), he chose prose for his further writing, believing that it guaranteed

¹⁷ A number of articles and reminiscences of polemical nature in this regard are included in Stanisław Jaworski, *Avangarda* (1992:264-339).

literature greater exposure. Jasieński's interest in democracy attests to his growing awareness of social problems, resulting from Poland's difficult historical past. On several occasions, and most notably in the manifesto *To the Polish Nation...*, he pointed out that because of the partition, national freedom was given priority at the expense of social justice. He believed that in sovereign Poland, modern artists have to note the 'new force which comes to claim its rights – the enlightened proletariat' as he put it (201). Artists must refocus their interests, he wrote in *The Manifesto on Futuristic Poetry*. They must not only draw inspiration from the masses ('We are exalted by the crowd, comprehended as a gigantic wave of the rotating turbine' [215]), but also 'inseminate the masses with their art' (210).

Although the social questions raised in his manifestos were legitimate and defined his particular sensitivity, Jasieński had difficulty focusing on the plight of the individual. He was attracted much more to the *masses*, to humanity in general, while in respect of the fate of the individual he was vague. He focused exclusively on the repulsive characteristics of an individual in his equally repulsive and ominous surroundings of morbid urban scenery. The physiology of human life was paralleled by the life of the urban organism. Futurists in their apparent apotheosis of the urban landscape and technology radically denounced the 'romantic melancholy of roses and nightingales', as Jasieński put it (221), which can be interpreted here as his personal declaration of departure from nature as a common background against which the life of man was set in nineteenth-century literature. Indeed, as can be seen in Jasieński's own works, the Futuristic hero was a city dweller, a man alienated from his natural environment, that eventually became the single, most frequent source of his frustration. This also became the source of the degenerating standards of life, both in an existential and a moral sense. This fascination with the city, 'the anthill of humanity', may motivate Jasieński's subsequent attraction to the impersonal mob and its enigmatic power over the life of the individual.

Jasieński's attitude to women deserves special mention. They are invariably subjected to a grotesque portrayal in his works, starting with the theoretical foregrounding in his manifestos:

Rozróżniamy spomiędzy dzieł sztuki architektonicznej, plastycznej, i technicznej – KOBIETĘ – jako doskonałą maszynę rozrodczą

Kobieta jest siłą nieobliczalną i nie wyzyskaną przez swój wpływ niebywały. Domagamy się bezwzględnego równouprawnienia kobiet we wszystkich dziedzinach życia prywatnego i publicznego. Przede wszystkim równouprawnienia w stosunkach erotycznych i rodzinnych. (1972:205-206; bold in original)

Amongst the objects of architecture, fine arts and technology, we distinguish – A WOMAN – as an ideal reproductive machine.

Woman is an unpredictable force whose potential is yet to be utilised. We demand an unconditional emancipation of women in all areas of private and public life. Especially emancipation in erotic and family relations.

The above quotation from the manifesto *To the Polish Nation...* shows the intensely ambivalent attitude to women on Jasieński's part.¹⁸ Jasieński's statement is riddled with contradictions: speaking in favour of emancipation, he sees women not as beings but as objects whose functions are strictly instrumental. The explicitly grotesque image of a 'birth-giving machine' can be attributed partially to the Futuristic strategy of shock and provocation, partially to the intention to abolish all previously created archetypal stereotypes ascribing to women motherly and nurturing functions only. It could also be attributed to the poet's youth and his adolescent fascination with an adult life – the twenty-year-old Futurist considers an 'erotic moment [to be one of] the fundamental functions of the life itself' (206). But in view of his subsequent creative output, one is tempted to consider the above utterings in terms of misogyny, expanding far beyond the requirements of an artistic convention, which in itself is the subject of a potentially interesting study. In the context of the present research we cannot, however, overlook the grotesque that grows out of presenting a human being in terms of an object.

Representing people in terms of machines, and moving machines into the category of animated – even intelligent – beings, is the surest way to arrive at the grotesque and of creating a grotesque image which is least difficult to recognise. Jasieński spelled out the

¹⁸ Compare this with point 10 of Marinetti's manifesto: '[...] we want to fight [...] feminism' (in Jaworski 1992:139). Jasieński's attitude differs from that of Marinetti, who demanded 'contempt for women', while Russian Futurists wholly avoided the issue in their manifesto. See the Polish translation of their manifesto *A Slap in the Face of the Public Taste* in Jaworski 1992:142-143.

philosophical foregrounding for such grotesque contamination of categories in some of his earlier manifestos saying: ‘technology is art, in the same way as painting, sculpture or architecture’ and ‘a good machine is an ideal model and the apogee of a work of art, because it embodies a perfect union of economy, purpose and dynamics’ (205). In true Futuristic spirit the above statements ennable the machine and give it a prominent place in the new hierarchy of values, making it one of the most important determinants of modernity. In his first ‘serious’ critical essay *Polish Futurism (Summary)*, Jasieński motivates the need to vindicate the machine to the human level:

Gigantyczny i szybki rozrost form techniki i industrii jest niewątpliwie najbardziej istotną podstawą i kęgielą momentu współczesnego. Wytworzył on nową etykę, nową estetykę, nową realność. Wprowadzenie maszyny w życie człowieka jako elementu nieodzownego, dopełniającego, musiało pociągnąć za sobą przebudowanie gruntowne jego psychiki [...]. (1972:225; emphasis in original)

Gigantic and rapid expansion of technology and industry is without a doubt the most important basis and the backbone of our time. It has created new ethics, new aesthetics and new reality. The introduction of a machine in human life as an **indispensable**, auxiliary element, had to lead to the complete rebuilding of man’s psyche [...].

Jasieński saw a man-machine parallel as a process similar to the introduction of foreign bodies into a living organism. The organism reacts by producing antibodies and ‘if a human or social organism is not able to produce a sufficient amount of antibodies, then the poisoning, the infection by this foreign body takes place’. In his view, art is responsible for creating ‘such psychological antibodies or forms that would subordinate the machine to humankind’ (both 225).

Jasieński points out that in its attitude to the machine lies the difference between Italian, Russian, and Polish Futurism. While Italian Futurism elevated the machine to the erotic ideal which eventually led to worship, the Russians were more ambivalent on the issue. Illustrating his argument with Mayakovsky’s poetry, Jasieński shows that Russian Futurists were initially hostile toward machines, then showed some affection, but in the framework of the new social order after 1917 they accepted partnership, which meant that

the machine would serve people in the same way as an employee serves his employer. Jasieński found his own position in this regard 'fundamentally different':

Maszyna nie jest produktem człowieka – jest jego nadbudową, jego nowym organem, niezbędnym mu na obecnym szczeblu rozwoju. Stosunek człowieka do maszyny jest stosunkiem organizmu do swego nowego organu. Jest ona niewolnikiem człowieka o tyle tylko, o ile niewolnikiem jego jest jego własna ręka, podlegająca rozkazom jednej i tej samej centrali mózgowej. Pozbawienie tak jednej, jak i drugiej przywróciłoby człowieka współczesnego o kalectwo. (1972:236; emphasis in original)

The machine is not a product of man - it is his superstructure, his new organ, necessary in the present stage of development. The attitude of man to the machine is an attitude of a body to its new organ. The machine is man's slave only inasmuch as his hand is, for both are subordinated to one and the same brain directory. To deprive modern man of one or the other [a limb or a machine] would make him a cripple.

This view of the machine, entirely consonant with Futuristic conceptualisation of the world, not only made its representation as a living organism possible, but, conversely, allowed the artist to portray a human being in terms of a mechanism devoid of spiritual aspects – something resembling a robot or a puppet. It allowed Jasieński to associate people not with the spiritual but with the physical or biological aspects of living, and *vice versa*, to present machines and other objects, normally perceived to be inanimate, as animated organisms. In Jasieński's works, the animation of machines and objects was initially limited to physiological functions, but later it was extended to include the intellectual or even emotional capabilities conventionally reserved for humans (*The Legs of Isolda Morgan, I Burn Paris, The Ball of the Mannequins*).

Throughout his writing Jasieński kept his audience in mind. Art which has a purpose is gratifying only when its impact is achieved. The Futurists wanted to shake up philistines accustomed to comforts of life and make them aware of the rapid changes taking place. They embarked openly upon the strategy of provocation, a technique probably as old as the history of art and described vividly in relation to the French Romantic, Théophile Gautier:

He threw himself with extravagant fervour into the movement [of Romanticism] and became an extreme opponent of the classic school. His defiance of conventionality led him even into grotesqueness of personal appearance – a cherry-coloured waistcoat, green trousers, grey overcoat lined with green satin, a luxuriant forest of black hair – this was the ‘get-up’ which he triumphantly describes as *pas mal combiné pour irriter and scandaliser le philistins*.¹⁹

A century later the same significance was to be attributed to the yellow jacket worn by Mayakovsky, complemented by an ever-present cigarette offensively hanging from his lips. Jasieński also followed this well tried path. It is repeatedly noted by those who knew him that he paid particular attention to his appearance. This characteristic of Jasieński was described by Strachocki, an actor who frequently took part in readings of Futuristic poetry:

Surprised, I looked askance at Jasieński. He was dressed in an eccentric fashion, he was wearing a monocle made of pure *fensterglass*²⁰. He was smoking a cigarette, placed in an extremely long cigarette-holder, a coquettish curl was tossed over his beautiful forehead, and... he looked decisively victorious. All this annoyed me then. Only when I came to know him better, did I understand, that it was a deliberately assumed pose. Behind that mask of an eccentric he was shyly hiding his deep emotionality, sensitivity and his exceptional intelligence. (in Jaworski 1992:309)

Similar comment is passed by Zechenter who knew Jasieński when he was a student at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.²¹ It is a well documented fact, although not always as significant as was the case with the avant-garde, that the appearance of artists is often

¹⁹ Everyman’s Encyclopædia (3 edn). London. 1956(VI):279.

²⁰ The translation retains the original formulation, meaning ‘clear glass used in windowpanes’. Strachocki’s jeer is misplaced, for Jasieński was suffering from ‘strong astigmatism and was wearing the monocle’ to correct this condition (see Dziarnowska 1982:37; Stern 1969:76). The issue of Jasieński’s astigmatism might be interesting, speculatively, from the point of view of the effect this disability might have had on his perception of the world, resulting in the grotesque character of his art. S. Karlinsky in *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol* commenting on ‘Gogol’s astigmatism in the perception of reality’ made an interesting observation in respect of the physical astigmatism of El Greco which might have been responsible for his ‘uniquely distorted vision of the world, [which] enabled him to conceive the distorted figures we so admire in his canvasses’ (Cambridge, Mass. 1976:108).

²¹ Wiktor Zechenter, ‘Z poetyckich wspomnień: Bruno Jasieński’. *Życie Literackie* 1965(49):7. See also: Dziarnowska 1982:45-63.

linked to the processes taking place in art. The extravagant sense of fashion which distinguished Jasieński in provincial crowd of Cracow is discernible in his writing in provocative artistic devices, most notably the grotesque.

The Futurists' negative attitude to tradition made them reject existing grammar, orthography and literary styles based on traditional syntax and orthography. The intention was to bring new meaning to language. Thus, the defamiliarised word implied new logic, the ambivalence of linguistic signs was emphasised and the 'material' content of language was put side by side with its abstract essence. Sentences, structured in defiance of the accustomed sequence, looked like disjointed collections of words, but aspired to acquire meaning in the process of individual interpretation. Motivated as the need to simplify complex grammar in order to bring literature closer to the masses, this technique proved to attract most negative comments. As one critic pointed out, words written according to the new phonetic fashion lost their familiar status and were confusing to readers instead of easing their comprehension of literature.²² The response from the general public was equally unsympathetic. The Futuristic experience thus almost invariably ended in disappointment on both sides – for authors and audience alike, frequently ending in violent clashes. Jasieński accused petty-bourgeois taste for the public's failure to understand his message, for rejecting his intention to deliver them from the mundane life. His accusations were also directed at the critics, whom he expected to have the foresight to see the intentions and logic behind Futuristic strategies. He dealt with this rejection in several ways: he put himself among 'the cursed poets' – *les poètes maudits*, as Verlaine once put it – who were ahead of their time (1972:218), he linked himself with Christ, he provoked and abused his audience and, finally, he chose to write his own criticism, which materialised in the *Exposé* to *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*.²³

²² The critic's name was Stefan Żeromski (1864-1925), the well known Polish novelist. In his article *Snobizm i postęp* ('Snobbism and Progress'), Żeromski criticised Futuristic poetics, mentioning Jasieński by name (in Jaworski 1992:264-268). More on Jasieński and Żeromski in Dziarnowska 1982 and Stern 1969.

²³ Henceforth abbreviated to *Exposé*.

In the *Exposé* he deals very briefly but aptly, with the two important aspects of a literary work relevant to this study, namely that of a plot and of a presented universe:

Powieść współczesna podaje konsumentowi pewne zasadnicze stany psychiczne, na podstawie których czytelnik konstruuje sobie szereg odpowiadających tym stanom faktów. Dlatego fabuła dla każdego czytelnika może się tu ułożyć inaczej i na tym polega jej niewyczerpane bogactwo. (1972:221-222)

The modern novel offers to its *consumer* certain basic psychological states, which would allow its reader to build for himself a number of facts, relevant to these states. That is why the [same] plot may arrange itself differently for different readers, and in this lies its inexhaustible richness.

The manifold theoretical implications of this statement are consonant with Jasieński's views on art, while two of them are significant for the grotesque in his works. Firstly, the plot must be constructed in such a way that it will engage the readers emotionally and lead to a certain reaction on their part. Secondly, the plot must be open-ended and ambivalent to allow for individual responses. Such a plot will be realised – in other words the artistic process will be completed – only when 'arranged' during the process of perception of the work and ultimately enriched by the reader's own life experience. This are the same conditions as expected from the plot of the grotesque work.

Many of Jasieński's statements quoted thus far concerning the relationship between art and reality helped the appearance of the grotesque in his works. As already pointed out, Jasieński considered reality, or life – he frequently used these terms interchangeably – to be the only source of art. His reasoning is logical. Since the 'rhythm of contemporary life [...] created a totally new kind of reality – the reality of white-hot steel, tottering on the verge of hallucination' (222), art must reflect this heightened reality. What is more important for Jasieński at the stage of his association with Futurism is *how* to 'reflect', rather than *what* is being 'reflected': in other words, the form is given primacy over the content. Referring to his short prose piece *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, and dismissing its macabre content as insignificant, he describes in detail what can be taken as an indirect method of the grotesque portrayal:

Temat w danym wypadku sensacyjny i per-e-wers²⁴ nie ma jako taki znaczenia. Jest on o tyle tylko makabrycznym, o ile makabrycznym staje się każdy problemat, jeśli zechcemy domyśleć go do końca. Sprójmy zastanowić się przez godzinę nad domem, około którego przechodzimy codziennie nie zauważając go zupełnie, a dom ten urośnie dla nas powoli do rozmiarów upiornych. Tak samo przez zbyt długie wpatrywanie się w jeden punkt zacierającą się w oczach naszych kontury realne i możemy zobaczyć w miejscu, gdzie przed chwilą stała statuetka, krowę w żakiecie i Chińczyka. (1972:222)

The theme is in this case sensational and *per-e-wers*, and of no importance as such. It is as macabre, as any problem that we try to think through. Let us for instance think for an hour about a house, which we pass every day not noticing it at all, and this house will slowly grow into a monstrous size. The same happens when we stare too long at one point: the real contours disappear and in that very place where a small statuette was a moment ago, we will see a cow in a jacket and the Chinese.

In this observation we recognise the description of a process similar to the one described by Zamyatin in his 1922 essay on synthetic art (see footnote 12), and illustrated by the image of one's hand scrutinised through a microscopic lens, quoted at the head of Chapter II. It is impossible to establish whether Jasieński had the opportunity to read Zamyatin's essay or not, but there is an apparent analogy in the way he sets out his views, which proves that despite geographic distances, artists reacted in a similar way to the impact of science and technology on their perception of the world. The unreliability of the senses has been noted – the altering eye of a microscope altered people's perception of the surrounding world. It has been realised that objective reality cannot be arbitrarily described because it might appear different to different people in different circumstances.²⁵ Jasieński thus believed that everyone must recreate his or her own image of reality, while an artist draws only a 'scenario'. Jasieński's 'novel' about the legs of Isolda Morgan, a few pages long, is an illustration of such a scenario which the reader must 'direct' for himself.

²⁴ Balcerzan (in Jasieński 1972:22) points out Jasieński's word-play, meaning *perverse* and styled on the German writer Hans Heinz Ewers (1871-1943). Jasieński mentions Ewers on more than one occasion, invariably in a critical context (see *Zmęczył mnie język*, 'I am Tired of Language' [1972:48]). Kayser includes Ewers in his discussion of 'tales of terror', pointing his tendency to pervert 'the commonly accepted notions about man's love life' and concluding that Ewers's grotesques are hollow (1981:142-143).

²⁵ See the detailed study of literary 'theories of perception' in Polish literature of the twentieth century in Barbara Sienkiewicz, *Literackie 'teorie widzenia' w prozie dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*. Poznań, 1992.

Jasieński shared Zamyatin's views on the synthetic character of the new art. He understood the term broadly. Using the word frequently in his manifestos, he spoke of the 'synthetic steps' the nation must take in pursuing its objectives (201). He believed that modern man needs 'synthetic' sensations (203), postulating that art must provide them; that is why it must be 'specially processed by artists into capsules, cleared in advance of all superfluous elements and served to the public in a completely ready, synthetic form' (212). These direct reference to synthesis, as well as many indirect statements proving Jasieński's tendency to synthetise the most unexpected entities into a new whole, fit well with the claim that his art is grotesque.

Jasieński's Post-Futurist Career

*Герольд коммунизма бессмертных идей,
Прославивший дней наших великолепье,
Лежу за решеткой, как враг и злодей, –
Может ли быть положение нелепей?!*

A harbinger of victorious Communist ideas,
A poet of glorious miraculous days,
I lie behind bars, like an enemy, and common criminal.
Can there be something more absurd than this?!

(From Jasieński's last poem
written in Butyrki prison)

While Jasieński's views on art during his life in Poland are well documented both in primary and secondary sources, the period of his residence in France, during the years 1925-1929, remains obscure.²⁶ His artistic expression during this time is limited to his poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela* and his novel *I Burn Paris*, which will be discussed later. In France Jasieński managed for the first time to legalise his status as a Communist by joining the Polish cultural section of the French Communist Party (in Jaworski 1995:155).

²⁶ It is to be hoped that the issue of Jasieński's expulsion from France, presently under investigation by Krzysztof Jaworski, will soon be published (see Jaworski 1995:15).

He was delegated to organise workers' theatre for the Polish immigrants in France.²⁷ One of his first assignments was to adapt his own poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela* into a play staged by the workers. Commenting on this experience in his 'Last Testimony' Jasieński noted 'that a writer does not necessarily have to "lower himself" to the level of the proletarian auditorium, as some of its self-appointed "nannies" of Hempel's type²⁸ may think' (ibid.:158). Jasieński also lectured to workers on literature and was involved in combating illiteracy.²⁹ These activities undoubtedly gave him the recognition and the contact with audiences he had lost after leaving Poland. On the other hand, along with the publication of his 'inflammatory' novel *I Burn Paris*, this activism might have contributed to his deportation from France (see Dziarnowska 1982:243).

When Jasieński arrived in the Soviet Union on 21 May 1929 (in Jaworski 1995:197), the scene was already set for subjecting literature to the political and ideological dictates of the Communist Party. The exile of Trotsky in January 1928 and the dismissal of Lunacharsky³⁰ from the position of the Commissar for Education in 1929 were just first steps in demonstrating the hardening of the cultural policy in the Soviet Union, ultimately confirmed in 1932 when the monolithic Union of Soviet Writers was established.³¹ Jasieński was greeted in the Soviet Union as a writer of international repute, but there was more to this reception than simply 'a friendly hand extended over the head of Europe' as

²⁷ Jasieński himself estimates the number of Polish immigrants in France at one million people (in Jaworski 1955:155).

²⁸ Jasieński refers to Jan Hempel (1877-?1937), a political activist, literary critic, editor and a member of the Central Committee of the CPP. He lived in the USSR from 1932 where he adopted the pseudonym Jan Wiślak. He later replaced Jasieński as the editor of *Kultura Mas*. Arrested in January 1937, he was probably subsequently executed (Jaworski 1995:14, note 22).

²⁹ See the recollection of one of these workers, Spychała, in Stern 1969:161.

³⁰ Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), writer, critic and political activist. Lunacharsky wrote a preface to Jasieński's play *The Ball of the Mannequins*. He was the first Commissar for Education in the USSR.

³¹ See the section 'Socialist Realism and the Grotesque' in Chapter II, Part I.

he put it in the emphatic inscription to *I Burn Paris*, having in mind Tomasz Dąbal.³² From the moment he put his foot on the Russian soil Jasieński was overloaded with numerous responsibilities even before he had a chance to acquaint himself with the Soviet system. In fact, he was nominated as editor of *Kultura Mas* before he even came to the Soviet Union (Dziarnowska 1982:259).³³ This was purely a political appointment, the aim of which was to create 'the Soviet Polish culture' (*polską kulturę radziecką*) and to support it with Jasieński's authority as the author of *The Lay of Jakub Szela* the policy of collectivisation among the Polish population on the predominantly rural Western borderland of the Soviet Union. Jasieński mentions this experience in passing in his 'Last Testimony' (in Jaworski 1995:165-168).

Another reason for the warm reception of Jasieński in the Soviet Union, was undoubtedly his knowledge of French intellectual circles. As Lidin³⁴ remembers, Jasieński was to become a link between Soviet writers and their Western counterparts (in Stern 1969:203-204). Thus one of the first tasks imposed on Jasieński by the International Association of

³² Dąbal (1890-1937) was to play an important role in Jasieński's life in the Soviet Union. A prominent Polish political activist, persecuted in Poland for his Communist activities, he found himself in the Soviet Union in 1923 as a result of an exchange of political prisoners between the two countries. While in the Soviet Union he was active among Polish nationals there, particularly in the area of culture. He took care of Jasieński from the moment of Jasieński's arrival in the Soviet Union, contributing considerably to building the legend of the writer persecuted for his leftist convictions. Dąbal was executed four days after Jasieński (Jaworski 1995:15-19). Jasieński comments extensively on his relationship with Dąbal in his *Last Testimony...* (in Jaworski 1995:130-182).

³³ This information is corroborated by Jaworski, who quotes relevant documents dated 16 May 1929. The Polish section of the MORP (see footnote 38), headed by Dąbal, decided to 'create [...] a monthly journal *Kultura Mas* ('Culture of the Masses') and to nominate comrade Jasieński as its editor.' The aim of *Kultura Mas* was 'to promote cultural revolution' (Jaworski 1995:19).

³⁴ Wladimir Lidin (real name Gomberg, 1894-1979) was one of Jasieński's devoted friends. After Jasieński's rehabilitation he was nominated custodian of his archives.

Revolutionary Writers (MORP)³⁵ was to condemn Henri Barbusse³⁶ publicly for failing to devote *Le Monde*, of which he was the editor, to proletarian literature in France, as instructed by MORP. Barbusse allegedly allowed *Le Monde* to become a forum for 'petty-bourgeois ideology and reactionary politics' for which he was held personally responsible (ibid.:184). This was in essence the substance of Jasieński's criticism of Barbusse, later published in the October 1929 issue of *Вестник иностранной литературы*, 'Bulletin of Foreign Literature' (Jaworski 1995:197).³⁷ In December 1931 Jasieński was again delegated to launch an attack on Barbusse which ended with a resolution condemning Barbusse's 'betrayal'; this was published in January 1932 (ibid.:199). Soon after that, Jasieński was relieved of the duties of the editor of *Литература мировой революции*, 'Literature of the World Revolution', a journal of MORP replacing the 'Bulletin', but not before he had published several notes of 'self-criticism' including acknowledging 'his mistakes' in handling the Barbusse case.³⁸

It is evident from these facts that the Soviet *apparatchiks* had a particular interest vested in Jasieński's arrival in the Soviet Union. Being a deported writer, he was also 'useful' as an example of capitalist oppression. The myth of his being a persecuted revolutionary writer was created, and his name was used to lend this myth credibility. Dziarnowska

³⁵ 'Mezhdunarodnaya Organizatsya Revolyutsionnykh Pisateley' (MORP). The organisation was established in 1925 and was disbanded in December 1935.

³⁶ Henri Barbusse (1873-1935), the French writer and Communist, and the author, among other works, of the book *Stalin*. According to a note in Jaworski, Barbusse died in Moscow during the VII Congress of the Communist International. Jasieński owed to Barbusse the serialised publication of *I Burn Paris* in *l'Humanité* (1995:33).

³⁷ See also Stern 1969:179-186; Dziarnowska 1982:280-284.

³⁸ In Jaworski 1995:199-200. That Jasieński did not give up easily can be seen in the letter dated 12 June 1932 addressed to the Executive Committee of the Communist International established to reorganise MORP, in which he stated: 'It is unacceptable that new sects emerge under the pretext of a Central Committee resolution and under the slogan of stamping out sectarian attitudes. [It is unacceptable] that personal scores are being settled under the guise of problems with nationalism and that instead of real reconstruction, the devilish dance for chairs was unleashed' (ibid.:95-96). In respect of Barbusse he says, referring to the minutes of relevant meetings, that 'the resolution [...] was accepted unanimously by the whole secretariat of MORP, also by those comrades who now lay the blame for the mistake on me' (ibid.:68).

summarises one of the articles in *Izvestya* where Jasieński might have read with astonishment his own ‘biography’.³⁹

From this biography he learned that he was banished from his native country for leading a theatre on tour reciting his revolutionary poems. He was forced to refrain from signing his articles for the *Workers’ Tribune*.⁴⁰ From this persecution he escaped to Paris, where he suffered abject poverty, sleeping under bridges and working part time in the city waterworks. Under these circumstances he wrote the marvellous poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela* and the novel *I Burn Paris*. (Dziarnowska 1982:252)

Of course none of this was true, but the legend of Jasieński was taking shape, while the man himself was told that he had to learn from Soviet workers how to become a proper revolutionary.⁴¹ Dziarnowska seems to capture Jasieński’s position in the Soviet Union very accurately:

[Jasieński] realised from fragments of conversation, from articles about him, that they actually knew nothing about him. He had yet to meet someone who had read *I Burn Paris*. Despite this, he was constantly praised – he or the legend? He did not want to contest the myth right away [...], but was under the strong impression that he was no longer himself, that he floated in this unknown world as an invented [person]. He had dreamed about this foreign world; he was grateful to it for acknowledging him as one of its own. But whom does it acknowledge in him, and what does it expect of him? (1982:255)

In this way, Jasieński’s case entered the sphere of ‘substitutions’ – the phenomenon, discussed earlier in Heller’s quoted essay, *Substitution as a Way of Life* (1989) – the same phenomenon that made politicians become ‘experts’ on art, and artists play the roles of politicians. This also meant that literature was no longer evaluated according to criteria of artistic worth but according to ideological content and political expediency. There is no point in denying that Jasieński was a fervent Communist, and that he was concerned solely with the future of proletarian art, but his views differed substantially from the hard-line

³⁹ Dziarnowska later identifies Dąbal as the author of this article (1992:259).

⁴⁰ *Trybuna Robotnicza* was a communist daily appearing in Lvov in the early nineteen-twenties.

⁴¹ Dziarnowska, who gives this information, refers to the welcoming speech of Béla Illés, a Hungarian Communist who has been living in the USSR since 1919 after the failure of the revolution in Hungary (1982:253).

Stalinist approach, the only approach permitted in the Soviet Union during the nineteen-thirties.⁴² Although he did not speak directly about the grotesque, most of his pronouncements show that he favoured artistic experiment, innovation, bold and imaginative plotting, all of which foreground the grotesque as one of the chief modes of artistic expression. Jasieński believed that literature must evoke the interest of the reader, exploit his intellectual potential, and involve him emotionally. This attitude can be detected in his occasional statements on literature, briefly summarised below.

Jasieński's statements on literature, appearing initially in *Kultura Mas* and later in the Soviet press, conspicuously display his concern with the *form* of the new proletarian literature. Dziarnowska notes that Jasieński was a 'linguistic purist', namely that he sharply criticised 'linguistic weeds [that is] Russianisms, bizarre deformations of the Polish language that led to the formation of preposterous dialect' (1982:267). Dziarnowska quotes an example (*Żylcy chodzą po korydorze i orzą, że przeszły wszystkie sroki*⁴³ (ibid.:311)) which illustrates well the vitriolic character of Jasieński's criticism. She also notes that Jasieński 'mercilessly chided plagiarism, the mindless mimicking of great masters and the pseudo-revolutionary character of [proletarian] literature' (ibid.:293). In the fourth and fifth issues of *Kultura Mas* a long article appeared, reflecting Jasieński's

⁴² Jasieński's name figures in a number of cases where he spoke in defence not only of writers, but literature as art. This proves that he retained his integrity. Soon after his arrival in the USSR Jasieński spoke against the 'anti-Mayakovsky's campaign' (see Stern 1969:172-173). He is also mentioned by Kemp-Welch among the writers who in 1934 opposed Yudin's criticism of Dymitry Mirsky, a scholar who found Fadeyev's novel *Last of the Udege* artistically inadequate (1991:173). Jasieński also strongly defended Leonov, when the latter was criticised for the ideological weakness in his novel, *The Road to the Ocean* (see footnote 50 below). On the other hand, Jasieński is implicated as a participant in the 1937 'scenario' trial of 'Trotskyites' (Radek and others) (ibid.:214), proving that he gave in to the mass psychosis of mistrust incessantly inflamed by the vicious circle of interrogations and denunciations.

⁴³ One can only guess what was intended by this expression which, one may say, is verbally Russian, grammatically Polish. The intended meaning, and the one which a native Russian speaker would derive from it, is that 'the residents walking in the corridor shout that all the deadlines have passed'. To a Pole the sentence is unintelligible; it implies that someone is talking about plowing (*orac* 'to plough' while Russian *orat'* means 'to shout') and about magpies (pl. *sroki* 'magpies', while in Russian pl. *sroki* means 'deadlines').

thoughts on language.⁴⁴ The article is a mixture of ideology and common sense. The first point it makes is that language is not a classless phenomenon, but that within one national structure there are as many languages as there are social classes, an idea that clearly originates in Marxist teachings. The second point, however, reflects Jasieński's desire to understand what is happening around him: 'the literary language always belongs to the ruling class; any new class taking over always revolutionises literary language by breaking old linguistic structures and introducing their own colloquial language' he notes. When it comes to the key question of whether the working class, after the victorious 1917 Revolution, should reject the language of prerevolutionary literature, Jasieński answers that 'it would be tantamount to replacing the "bourgeois" threshing-machine with "peasant" flails'. Jasieński expresses the view that the proletariat should not indiscriminately reject their cultural inheritance, but 'should adopt and digest it in the stomach of its materialistic and dialectic consciousness'. He concludes that the language of the proletariat is 'too poor to embrace the complexity of modern life that has already been expressed in the language of the educated classes. The revolutionary role of the proletariat is to open the sluicegate through which the colloquial language of both the peasantry and the urban proletariat will flow as equals into the mainstream [language]' (in Dziarnowska 1982:301).

Reading Jasieński's words today, one hears in them an echo of the avant-garde's experimentation with new means of expression, and even an echo of Jasieński's own Futuristic manifestos. The style of Jasieński's criticism is similar: witty, merciless and to the point. He pinpoints all the stylistic awkwardness and senseless copying of 'shoddy bourgeois literature' (*ibid.*:294). Jasieński's criticism must have hurt more than one literary ego, exposing him to subsequent attacks for deviating from 'Lenin's idea of cultural revolution' and for failing to understand the difficulties 'faced by the proletarian dictatorship at this particular stage of its historical development' (*ibid.*:324). The

⁴⁴ Jasieński touched a very sensitive point, for language – like all other aspects of Soviet reality – was in the process of transformation. Sinyavsky's observations on the 'Soviet language' sum up the issue very aptly (see 1990:Ch. VII).

precedent for the future accusation of Jasieński as a propagator of 'national opportunism' (*nacjonalopportunizm*) had been created.

Even as an avant-garde artist Jasieński was never truly outspoken on the matter of the content of literature, except for a few general statements such as 'art must not comfort or appease the reader' or that it must be 'like daily bread, deeply topical', both quoted above in regard to Jasieński's association with Futurism. These are far from prescriptive statements and leave the artist free to choose the theme of his own work. In this respect Jasieński's views did not change when he became a Soviet citizen. He continued to encourage writers to be imaginative in choosing their plots, and to structure this plot clearly; moreover he applied this strategy in his Soviet novel *Man Changes his Skin*. He believed that Western bourgeois literature proved beyond doubt the usefulness of an intriguing well-structured plot, which attracts attention and eases the transfer of the author's ideas to the reader. Such were the theme and tone of his speech during the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.⁴⁵

As in his other pronouncements of the Soviet period, including his Congress address, Jasieński's intention to be politically correct while retaining personal integrity is apparent.⁴⁶ Thus, constantly praising all aspects of Soviet life, he was nevertheless clearly asking his fellow writers not to relinquish the calling of an artist:

I believe that Engels's well-known definition of realism – typical individual in typical circumstances – is not always correctly represented in our literary work. I have noticed that we frequently limit ourselves to stereotypical situations, if only to avoid being accused that the created situation is artificial and has nothing to do with reality. This unnecessary restriction to portray as typical only a few situations acknowledged by our critics leads to schematism and fossilisation. This is the reason why our worker, after having read three or four novels about our new constructions and seeing in them typical situations, impatiently puts aside the fifth one saying: 'Is this a new novel about our constructions? But I have already read it!' (In Stern 1969:200)

⁴⁵ Jasieński's Congress speech is available only in the 700-hundred page long stenograph of the Congress (Stern 1963:199).

⁴⁶ Both Stern (1969) and Dziarnowska (1982) are consistent in making this point.

In words equally as harsh as he used when he was a Futurist, Jasieński attacked Soviet literary criticism for simplistic and vulgar rejection of works that diverged from 'typical circumstances':

Deciding behind his desk what is typical and what is not, the critic makes vulgar mistakes. In his process of evaluation, instead of applying the criterion of the relationship between the work and genuine reality, the critic applies the scholastic rule and examines the degree in which the work concurs with that or the other fossilised literary stratagem. (*ibid.*:201)

The key issue in Jasieński's statement is his interpretation of 'genuine reality'. As a Futurist, he believed that reality is illogical and unforeseeable. Now he says 'In our amazing epoch typical became such circumstances that in any other epoch would be artificial and unrealistic'. Comparing these two statements, we see the difference between his two positions. The avant-garde artist was overwhelmed by life, by technology, and by demographic revolution, and for the most part feared it. The Soviet citizen found life fascinating and wanted to extol it. Despite this important distinction, in both instances we recognise the same notion regarding the 'extraordinary' quality of reality both 'then' and 'now', and we hear an echo of a Futurist pronouncement that the new reality requires new forms of art,⁴⁷ bold and imaginative. When at one point in his Congress speech Jasieński says, 'draw your fascinating ideas directly from our reality, learn to absorb the reader's attention and ultimately his heart and mind', we recall the Futurist Jasieński pronouncing art to be part of life, 'its pulse and organic function'.

Since his early days as a Futurist, Jasieński had believed as an artist that 'art is creating new things'. Never accepting the mere copying of reality, he believed instead that literature must creatively transform reality. In this lies the crucial difference between Jasieński and the vulgar interpretation of realism as advocated by certain interpreters of socialist realism. During the Congress in Minsk in 1936 he aggressively attacked this narrow-minded approach to the creative calling of a writer: 'I accuse our literature of showing too little courage in using invention and fantasy. We frequently repeat that our reality is so rich and

⁴⁷ '[...] I am against all those who try to squeeze new content into the psychological and compositional stratagems of old literature' (Jasieński 'Congress speech' in Stern 1969:202).

eventful that the writer's vision of it seems poorer. Frequently we say that plot is not needed, that it is enough to show our reality. But fearing fantasy, we impoverish this reality.' Ending his Minsk speech, subsequently reprinted in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, Jasieński pronounced a toast: 'To the bold fantasy that grows out of our reality and does not fear to step into its future. For the fantasy and invention, so needed by a socialist writer, as the dream is needed by the designer building our wonderful future with the bricks of today' (in Dziarnowska 1982:502-503; Stern 1969:225). Dziarnowska notes that Jasieński's speech initiated a vigorous discussion on formalism in literature, faithfully recorded by *Literaturnaya gazeta*. As a result, the Moscow section of the Union of Soviet Writers organised a conference. In his address, Jasieński again defended the basic principle of art, the creative transformation of reality, even if he insisted on qualifying art with the adjective 'proletarian'. He began by defining formalism and then proceeded to criticise vulgar realism. He attacked criticism of the visual arts as 'even worse than that of literary criticism', saying that it was inundated with oversimplification and crude commentary. 'The criterion of understanding is replaced with the criterion of resemblance', he continued, eager to illustrate his argument:

The still-lifes by Cézanne, in their view are formalistic, because the colour of his pears does not resemble the colour of real *beurres*.⁴⁸ Only that painter is regarded as a good realist on whose canvases people and objects look as if they are real. Is this right?

We have all seen the portrait of Voroshilov on his horse. Voroshilov looks like a real person, and the horse is real; it even has a mane. But this is not a portrait of Voroshilov, the first marshal of the first socialist country. The artist has failed to represent the essence of the word 'Voroshilov'.

[...] To say that the forms of our 'Impressionists' and the poems of Pasternak are not comprehensible, that all the problems will be solved if only [artists] reject these forms and begin to write like Pushkin, proves at best complete ignorance. (In Dziarnowska 1982:503-504)

Trying to explain the complexity of the issue, Jasieński says that great artists, consciously or not, could always capture the ideology that shaped their epoch. Only mediocre artists chose naturalism and subjective points of view, substituting primary issues with secondary,

⁴⁸ *Beurre Hardy* is a high quality pear.

irrevocably losing the perspective of what gave each epoch its particularity. He attacked naturalism in the strongest terms:

Naturalism is an artist's disease that, because of his ideological ignorance,⁴⁹ prevents him from applying the correct measure of value. It leads to a photographic reprint, to fascination with detail. We find elements of such naturalism in any writer, in my own works as much as in the works of others.

Our Soviet literature, like fresh air, requires furious hatred towards photographism, towards empirical narrow-mindedness, towards pottering about with particulars.

If elements of naturalism are seen in our literature, then in the same degree they are seen in our criticism. An obvious lack of taste, a diluted empiricism replacing the perception of genuine reality with several versatile set patterns – this is all the ideological equipment of certain critics. To tell the truth, a critic pretending to educate the writer has to be ideologically his superior. (In Dziarnowska 1982:504-505)

Clearly, Jasieński's reference to ideology is deliberately vague, in order not to overshadow the real message he wants to put across. And this message is simply: leave writers alone, let them serve people to the best of their abilities, trust their artistic instincts. However in 1936 this was expecting far too much. Nevertheless, with suicidal determination Jasieński continued to expose Soviet literary criticism which had by then assumed the firm position of an ideological watchdog over arts, not only pointing at its 'shallow, arrogant and patronising attitude' to literature but mercilessly deriding it, quoting French writers and philosophers. In his speech during the Moscow conference, Jasieński discussed at length the attitude of Soviet critics to the novel *The Road to the Ocean* by Leonov, a prominent novelist,⁵⁰ remarking bitingly: 'If the head clashes with the book and you hear the sound of an empty barrel, it is not always the fault of the book' (in Dziarnowska 1982:506].⁵¹

⁴⁹ Jasieński speaks of ideology in general terms, believing that each epoch has its own ideological identity.

⁵⁰ Leonid Maksimovich Leonov (1899-1994). The novel in question (*Дорога на океан*) was published in 1935.

⁵¹ Dziarnowska attributes the origins of this aphorism to the French writer and philosopher Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771), whose main work *De l'esprit* was publicly burned by the hangman. Helvétius was forced to retract some of his doctrines, although some people maintained that he had written openly what many others thought secretly. As kindly pointed out to me by Professor Manfred Misch, this aphorism might actually belong to Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), a German philosopher and satirist.

Leonov's novel gave Jasieński yet another reason publicly to defend the writer's right to his vision, and his right to count on the reader to complete the act of creation, this time in an article written for *Literaturnaya gazeta*. The article *Идеологический рост художника* ('The Ideological Growth of an Artist') gave Jasieński also the opportunity to justify his own writing:

Leonov's novel forces the reader to think and to ponder over what the author did not say or said later, but differently from what we might have expected. Already this makes the novel an important phenomenon in recent literature.

There are books in which everything is clear and straightforward: the author poses several questions, and, as the action evolves, he solves them for the reader, giving in the end a ready-made solution. The reader's role in such cases is narrowed to the role of a passive observer or connoisseur. Myself, I prefer books of a different kind⁵² – books, in which there is no solution on the last page, as required in arithmetical sums; books that stimulate our thoughts, that make us think along with the author, that sometimes make us oppose his views and look for our own solution to the issues at stake. Authors who allow this have every right to respond with the words of Feuerbach: You condemn me for my shortcomings, but remember, my virtues depend on them. (In Dziarnowska 1982:508-509)

Nadezhda Mandelshtam is quoted as saying: 'Unanimity did not fall from the skies. It was eagerly created by thousands of supporters' (in Kemp-Welch 1991:240). In times when 'no one wanted to risk an open demonstration of their views' (Iwanow 1991:211),⁵³ Jasieński spoke against the Party's determining influence on Soviet literature, a stand for

⁵² Jasieński's book collection was destroyed after his arrest. His love of books was exceptional, as seen in his own description of his Moscow book collection:

So many books [...] I brought home, placing them on many-storeyed book shelves! At the bottom, like fearsome janitors keeping watch on the entrance, stand side by side pedantic Littré and talkative Larousse in gold-braided livery ... One floor up live honourable classics suffering from asthma. The most space, as in any decent Soviet flat cooperative, is given to people who have large families. The fertile old man Voltaire alone with all his 97-volume progeny occupies almost a whole mansion. Old Hugo lives with his 57 volumes on three floors. Gloomy and immoral (*bezbożnik*) de Sade quietly cohabits with the pretentious, sanctimonious hypocrite Chateaubriand, while the two-storey Balzac silently tolerates Sainte-Beuve. [...] Leading with them long night conversations, I still expect my long awaited friends: jaunty tramp Villon and indomitable Restif [de la Bretonne] with his *Contemporary Women*. (In Stern 1969:204)

⁵³ M. Iwanow, *Pierwszy narod ukarany: Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921-1939*. Warszawa, 1991.

which he paid the ultimate price. He was arrested on 31 July 1937 and jailed in Butyrki prison in Moscow. On 21 September 1937 he wrote a letter to Yezhov, stating that he could no longer endure the tortures to which he was subjected, and demanding to be executed immediately (in Jaworski 1995:130-131). In subsequent letters to Minaev (a commissar of NKVD) and Birshtain (investigating magistrate) he retracted his admission of guilt, saying that he was forced to sign it as a result of physical and moral torture, adding: 'I signed a false testimony which you dictated to me, [...] I signed it only to buy an earlier death, to deliver myself from further pointless torture' (*ibid.*:136).

To conclude this overview of Jasieński's views on art, one could hardly find a more pertinent statement than the one by Rimma Volynska in her article *Avant-Gardism in Jasieński's 'The Mannequin Ball'*:

Jasieński's value [...] lies not in some neat opposition between *l'art pour l'art* and *Tendenzkunst*, nor in the disparity of a youthful poetic Dream and a mature commitment to prosaic Reality. It is to be found, rather, in his attempt to reconcile the aesthetic and ethical imperatives of art, and in the theoretically complex attitude he assumed toward his own writing throughout his entire career. His literary creations demonstrate a consistent programmatic belief *both in social ideology and artistic autonomy* [...]. [1994:378, emphasis in original]⁵⁴

Jasieński's dedication to the grotesque throughout his creative life enforces this point. The following examination of his grotesque writing, beginning with his poetry and ending with the collection of short stories he published in 1937, aims to prove that his loyalty to avant-garde poetics never faded.

⁵⁴ *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 1994(XXXVI):3-4.

CHAPTER IV

THE AMBIVALENT WORLD OF BRUNO JASIEŃSKI'S POETRY

In this chapter Jasieński's poetry will be analysed with the intention of identifying the issues which were central to him, and to show that he found the grotesque to be the most effective mode in which to express himself. In interpreting his early verse works the focus will primarily be on the targets of the grotesque representation, but the device itself will be identified in its multiple manifestations. It will be shown that, apart from the fact that the way for the grotesque in his poetry was paved by the artistic programmes of the time in general and Futurism in particular, Jasieński shows distinctive personal fondness for this device. He used the grotesque as a 'short cut', as a means for stating his views which is brief but pregnant with meaning. More importantly, however, the frequency with which he uses the grotesque in his portrayal of the world betrays the ambivalence in his attitude to people and to modern civilisation. His grotesque portrayal of people allows him to focus on the physical, even physiological, aspects of existence. The individual in his poetry appears to be invariably a soulless inanimate object or an underdog of the animated world leading a repulsive life. Conversely, in presenting the inanimate world, the grotesque¹ allows him to attribute biological, organic functions to the things conventionally perceived as still-life. The grotesque mode in the latter betrays his inconclusive view of modern, technologically advancing civilisation, discernible in his mixture of admiration and apprehension of machines – miracles of advance but invading the space traditionally occupied by humans. Last but not least, the dominant type of the grotesque in his poetry, the 'morbid' grotesque, responsible for the apocalyptic image of the contemporary world, betrays Jasieński's critical attitude to it.

¹ See Kayser's words about the grotesque world: 'The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it. Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes and automata, and their faces frozen to masks' (1981:183).

Since a full collection of Jasieński's works is still to be compiled, the study of his poetry is based on the selection presented in *Utwory poetyckie. Manifesty. Szkice*,² the most representative selection of his poetry to date. Balcerzan divided his selection of Jasieński's poetic works into several sections. The first three are grouped according to their place of publication, generally retaining the thematic and chronological order of their original appearance. Section one is devoted to poems published in the 1921 collection, entitled *But w butonierce* ('A Shoe in the Buttonhole'),³ followed by poems from *Ziemia na lewo* ('Earth to the Left'), initially published in 1924. 'Poems from Journals' contains a selection of Jasieński's poetry which appeared in various 'new art' publications, mostly in 1921, and later, between 1924 and 1927. The fourth section of the selection is based on the principle of genre and features three long poems: *Miasto* ('The City'), *Piesń o głodzie* ('A Song about Hunger') and the longest, generally considered the best of Jasieński's poems, *The Lay of Jakub Szela*, reprinted from the original book published in Polish in Paris in 1926. Balcerzan also selected Jasieński's translations of Russian poets, mostly of Vladimir Mayakovsky. Although these do not lie directly within the scope of this study, they provide us with interesting material in support of our thesis that Jasieński's writing was predominantly grotesque, for even a brief comparative analysis of translated poems confirms his unusual propensity for this device.⁴ The selection of poetry ends with bilingual (Polish/Russian) versions of poems, written by Jasieński in Soviet Russia. The poems show the tragic fall of his poetic inspiration from the heights of Futuristic *parole in libertà* – 'words at liberty' – to the 'lower depth' of dedication to 'the Cause'. The tone of the poems is serious and pompous, the language stifled and pretentious. There is no spark of humour, no jeer so typical of his earlier poems. Whereas his former poems, even if some

² *Poetry. Manifestos. Sketches*. (Selection and introduction by E. Balcerzan). Wrocław, 1972. All quotations of Jasieński's poetry in this chapter are from this source and are indicated by the page number only.

³ The title *But w butonierce* explicitly illustrates word-play, warning that the phonetic semblance is not always matched by the semantic similarity.

⁴ It is clearly visible from the examples provided by Balcerzan (1968:205-291).

of them are considered to be latent translations,⁵ have the undeniable aura of originality, his last poems give the impression of being clumsy imitations of Mayakovsky at his most dull.⁶ As a dot at the end of Jasieński's poetic career stands the last untitled poem in the selection, written in the Butyrki prison in Moscow. Mayakovsky's self-predicted 'the dot of a bullet'⁷ came, however, from the suicidal shot which ended his life in 1930; Jasieński was shot dead by the Soviet secret police seven years later, soon after completing his last poem. By contrast with the three 'Soviet' poems, this last poem occasionally revives certain grotesque imagery, so profuse in his Futuristic poetry ('moon like a clown [...] is making faces', 'combine-harvesters moan, having eaten their fill of grain' [195]). This sad poem bears witness to the waste of artistic talent and unfulfilled dreams of serving humanity, in other words, to the senseless annihilation of human life (see the fragment quoted earlier as an epigraph to the section 'Jasieński's Post-Futurist Career', on p. 74).

The volume ends with several theoretical pieces by Jasieński, mentioned in the previous chapter. They betray their author's inquisitive and observant mind, his courage in contesting established tastes and values; they show the artist's intensive search for his own truth and for the language which would best serve his art. This angry and confrontational tone of his articles stands in contrast to the last position in the volume, written in 1931 *Cos*

⁵ Examining Jasieński's techniques applied in translating Russian poets (Mayakovsky, Esenin) Balcerzan comes to the conclusion that apart from 'open' translations there is a group of texts among Jasieński's works which should be classified as *latent* translations. In his definition, 'latent translation' is what is presented to readers as an original creation, although 'it has a number of structural elements of a foreign-language text written earlier and by another author'. In Balcerzan's opinion, there are many reasons why the author of such a translation conceals his tactic. He believes that it is being done in the full understanding that sooner or later such a ploy is going to be exposed. Balcerzan places his concept of 'latent translations' in the category of literary allusions (1968: 218-219).

⁶ See Balcerzan: '[Apart from the autobiographical details] the whole stylistic rest is taken from "late" Mayakovsky. Steps. Rhythm. Intonation. Phraseology. Syntax. Metaphor. [...] Everything originates in [poems] *Хорошо*, in *Во весь голос* and other poems of "late" Mayakovsky' (1968:285).

⁷ See Mayakovsky, *Флейта- позвоночник: Все чаще думаю – не поставить ли лучшее точку пули в своем конце.* ('I think more and more often – shouldn't I put the dot of a bullet at my end?' (1965:275).

w rodzaju autobiografii ('By Way of Autobiography').⁸ The intention of pleasing and appeasing the 'comrade-reader' is forcefully evident in this declaration of submission to the system. Fortunately, Jasieński's rebellious nature and artistic instincts 'saved' most of his writings of the Soviet period from the total dullness and conformity manifested in this short piece.

***'Art must be an all-penetrating, mind-blowing surprise.'*⁹**

Throughout his artistic career Jasieński continued to structure his work around a carefully thought-out plot. That is why even in his poems the themes he tackled and the causes he advocated can be relatively easily established. One of the issues especially close to his heart was art. Not only did he frequently speak on theoretical concerns but he systematically exemplified them in his own creative works. Moreover he did it through employing such stylistic means as they would always result in a startling piece of work and ensure a shocking experience for the audience. The poem *Rzygające posągi* ('Vomiting Statues'), one of Jasieński's first statements against traditional understanding of art and its role, features art – an abstract concept in conventional logic – as an animated *persona*. At first it is 'undressed Gioconda', then a frivolous lady who eventually becomes the poet's lover.

Jasieński's insistence on the created universe having its origins in reality is apparent; thus his poetry has familiar and concrete points of reference to time: twentieth century ('film company Pathé & Co'), autumn ('behind the window autumnness¹⁰ sips [*sączy się*] through

⁸ In *Utwory Poetyckie. Manifesty, Szkice*. (1972:245-255).

⁹ *Sztuka musi być niespodzianą, wszechprzenikającą i z nóg walącą*. Jasieński, *To the Polish Nation...* (1972:204).

¹⁰ To translate poetry is an extremely difficult task, but to translate poetry which thrives on *acrobatic* linguistic devices contrived by committed Futurists is outright impossible. The modest attempts on my part to translate fragments of Jasieński's writing, poetry included, are strictly philological translations, done with only one purpose in mind: to convey what is most important

golden alleys'); and to place: the action moves from a café to a literary salon, to a boudoir and then to a park and ends in the streets, imitating – or symbolising – the road along which art has travelled: from élite to popular. However this familiar modern city setting is invaded with bizarre images: 'musical notes terribly bored sit on a piano keys', 'undressed Gioconda stands in her panties on the table, loudly asking for *cacao-choix*',¹¹ white statues 'dressed in their stoniness always stand "in place"'¹² invariably correct', and a 'wooden janitor dares to laugh'. The grotesque character of these images is obvious: Gioconda is a woman pictured in the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci, the symbol and embodiment of art itself. Her appearance in a night club is a grotesque animation of an image from the portrait, while the way she appears – in panties and asking for an alcoholic beverage – is offensive. What was high and sublime in a symbol is trivialised and ridiculed by Gioconda's undignified conduct. Statues, as well as musical notes, are attributed by the poet with conscious actions and an ability to choose while, in the same context, the humanness of a janitor is at best ambivalent, he is a wooden object with no trace of emotions. It is plainly visible that the poet synthetised elements customarily belonging to different realms and different aesthetic codes, and expressed them in a *lingua* which derives from various linguistic resources. The grotesqueness of the presented world intensifies to the extent that familiar streets become populated with 'dancing nonsenses' while night becomes 'drunk with champagne and lips', imitating the poet's own state – his infatuation with Lady Art, and his intoxication 'after a tenth [glass of] Cliquot'. There is no explanation, though, why the reality is altered, or that it has been altered at all, for the reality is presented in the poem without any awareness of its strangeness.

for the grotesque – the meaning and imagery. The form of stanzas, punctuation and capitalisation of certain words follow the original. Whenever possible, neologisms are invented to obey the poet's practice. In this case 'jesienność' is derived from *jesień*, meaning autumn.

¹¹ A popular chocolate liqueur in Poland.

¹² Jasieński, as proposed in Futuristic programmes, 'tried' the linguistic potential of words to the utmost. The use of quotation marks implies that the expression is meant in figurative (further reinforced by the word 'correct'), and not what would be expected in the context of statues – literal sense.

In the grotesque world everything is possible, including statues throwing up in the park. These very statues which are most readily associated with the concept of art, in Jasieński's poem are 'vomiting' – a function in itself of dual significance, referring both to *trivial* physicality and to the *sublime*, life-saving process of purification. Staying true to his own diagnosis expressed in manifestos that 'life and art in Poland are under threat of suffocation' unless a 'tracheotomy' can be performed (198), Jasieński prescribes vomiting as means for (old) art to purge itself of the harmful toxins of the past. The grotesque character of the poem *Vomiting Statues* is paramount (and tantamount) to the precalculated strategy of scandal and shock, and well illustrates statements like the one made in the manifesto: 'no one in 1921 may create as before' (211).

The pattern applied in the *Vomiting Statues* – the evolution of art from élite to popular manifested by the tone of the poem – is echoed among others by *Zmęczył mnie język* ('I Am Tired of Language'¹³). Poetry (read: old art) used to be 'a mistress of elegant gentlemen', but at present art is democratic, is part of life and enjoys it together with the poet. In the end, nature, art, and the poet are united in the carnival of life, for, as Jasieński proclaimed in the manifesto, 'art is the sap and the joy of life' (203).

Jasieński continues his denunciation of the 'old' art in the poem *Ipecacuana* ('Ipecacuanha')¹⁴ but this time he chooses a different strategy. As perceptively pointed out by the editor of the volume, Balcerzan, the poem is a paraphrase of the poem *Незнакомка* ('An Unknown Lady')¹⁵ by Aleksander Blok. This information considerably enriches the scope for the interpretation of Jasieński's poem. In his own poem Blok, a leading Russian Symbolist 'discerns his former ideal in a lone and enigmatic woman of the night in a

¹³ Translation as in Carpenter 1983:30.

¹⁴ 'Ipecacuanha – the root of South American shrub used as emetic and purgative' (Concise Oxford Dictionary 1992:626). As in the previous poem, *Vomiting Statues*, this title is also deliberately chosen by the author, immediately to sensitise the reader to its grotesque content. As Harpham points out, 'the issue of titles or naming can be crucial to the grotesque' (1982:12).

¹⁵ In some sources translated as *The Stranger*.

tavern' as Evelyn Bristol put it (in Moser 1992:417) – an understanding embraced by Jasieński. By imitating Blok, Jasieński engages in a polemic, both stating his own viewpoint and mocking not only Blok personally but the whole Modernist movement, of which Symbolism was a part. Blok, even if threading into the realm of the grotesque, builds his idea of art through esoteric symbolic imagery. Dim lights and misty darkness create a backdrop for the sudden appearance of a mysterious young lady enshrouded in silk. The poet's consciousness floats between reality and dream. At one moment the woman is 'untouchable' – a symbol of ideal beauty, and the next moment she is a drunken monster – *пьяное чудовище*.¹⁶ Jasieński takes up the polemic with the most famous of Russian Symbolists by ridiculing his poetics through an allusion to vomiting, effectively demonstrating in this way his disgust with overly-aesthetic and decadent Modernism. He uses a number of means that the grotesque puts at his disposal. His grotesque becomes more brutal than that of Blok, starting with an exploitation of the ambiguity of language itself. Pleasant to the ear, the unusual word 'ipecacuanha' stands, in fact, for an 'exotic bush, the roots of which are used to induce vomiting' (Balcerzan in Jasieński 1972:5; see also footnote 14). Jasieński uses the word in his poem twice, first as the title, in the sense just elucidated, second, as its last word, in the completely incongruous context:

*A wieczór byłem malariki...
Płakałem w kąciku do rana
O smutnej niebieskiej Pani
Z oczami jak ipecacuana... (1972:7)*

And in the evening I was little...
I cried in the corner till morning
About the sad blue Lady
With eyes like ipecacuanha ...

We may also note that the last stanza shows a sudden change in tone, from the ironically polemic to the outrightly mocking. This becomes especially evident in a close comparison with Blok's poem. For Blok 'the blue and bottomless eyes' of his mysterious lady 'flower

¹⁶ Blok, A. 'Незнакомка' in *Selected Poems*. Oxford, 1972:90-91.

on the far away shore', seducing the poet and inviting him to come and discover in them the secrets of art.¹⁷ In Jasieński's poem the eyes of the lady form an incongruous connection with the emetic plant, pointing out the elusiveness, or even the emptiness of the symbolic imagery used by Blok.

The poem *Ipecacuanha* is marked by distinctive imagery: ladies in foxes, ladies made of velvet and silk, and the froggy gaze of gentlemen ('*Siedzieli w krzesłach panowie, Patrzyli wzrokiem żabim...*')¹⁸, as well as a 'creamy boredom' and a 'night with breasts', belong to the real world – or do they? The implied narrator, the poet, is not sure himself: '(perhaps it's only my dream...)'¹⁹ he doubts in the second line of the first stanza, echoing – or mocking – Blok. The ambivalence is sustained; the narrator – the poet – as a source of information proves unreliable and the reader is left to figure out the plausibility of presented characters and events alone. Of course, it can be argued that the poem as a whole is a metaphor, and images, even if grotesque, refer to reality only through their symbolic relevance. But the word 'perhaps' successfully rebuffs the metaphor, and places the poem entirely in the realm of the grotesque.

Although this study focuses on the grotesque imagery and other devices which make the work grotesque – and the prosody is seldom one of them – here an exception should be made in order to show that Jasieński's attack on the 'old art' is total. To achieve the desired effect, he manipulates the versification to the point of compromising its poetic value. Jasieński, who on many occasions was praised for his exceptional virtuosity in using even the most difficult metric forms,¹⁹ makes *Ipecacuanha* his only poem having the tediously monotonous rhythm of a beggar's ballade: seven and eight syllable, four-verse

¹⁷ Compare with *Незнакомка*: 'И очи синие бездонные Цветут на дальнем берегу. В моей душе лежит сокровище, И ключ поручен только мне!' (Blok 1972:91)

¹⁸ (*A może mi tylko śni się...*) Jasieński puts in parenthesis, which definitely draws attention to this particular statement. Compare with the similar line in Blok's poem: *И каждый вечер, в час назначенный (Иль это только снится мне?)* (1992:90).

¹⁹ Jasieński's achievements in prosody are discussed among others by Balcerzan (1968) and Kolesnikoff (1982:42-51).

stanzas with the regular rhythm of three accented syllables in each line, and regular rhyme *abab*.²⁰ This monotonous prosodic routine is matched by repetitions of certain lines, for instance: 'I read *rhythrical* verses', '*Rhythrical* stanzas I read', 'in my mind Skryabin *wandered around...*' (emphasis added). The penultimate stanza, composed of almost identical lines, brings the atmosphere of dullness to its culmination:

I było wszystko, jak wszędzie.
I było wszystko, jak dzisiaj.
I była w trzecim rzędzie
Pani w niebieskim lisie. (1972:6)

And everything was, like everywhere.
 And everything was, like today.
 And in the third row there was
 A lady in blue fox.

After reading routinely rhythmic verses for the same lethargic audience, and hearing the 'steady splashing'²¹ of [their] hands', the poet has enough of boredom in the form of a fleshy and shapeless malignant tumour, 'sarcoma', destroying art. He breaks the spell of the melodramatic monotony of Symbolism by 'breaking the moon' and having an affair with night, whose 'breasts are bulging', reminding the poet of his first love. A pattern of change in tone from semi-serious to clownish tomfoolery, noted in previous poems, is repeated here. Monotonous and decadent art, which until now served the decadent élite, is transformed into a vivacious participant in the poet's happiness. Although in the last two stanzas the pattern of rhyme remains the same, the rhythm of the regular three stressed syllables is interrupted by the occasionally added fourth stress, and sentences are broken into short dynamic statements. The system of versification used in this poem thus becomes a part of the message the poet intends to convey, and a part of his fervent attack on the old art. It aims to show that the poetic style used by the Symbolists perpetuates monotony and boredom and its use for the modern poet is strictly limited to a parody.

²⁰ It parodies Blok's only slightly more complex versification: ten and eight syllable.

²¹ In the original: *Pluskali miarowo w ręce* – unusual use of the verb *pluskać* (to splash), instead of *klaskać* (to applaud) emphasises routine, rather than enthusiasm.

After mocking and even ridiculing ‘old’ art, the poet arrives at the point at which he has to be more specific regarding the issue of new art. The poems *I Am Tired of Language* and *To Futurists* are thus directed toward the present and the future. Jasieński again turns to vivid grotesque imagery, exceeding by far the limits necessary for the clarity of the message he wants to convey. This makes clear that the poet is already comfortable with the device of the grotesque even at this early stage in his creative career, and is determined to turn it into a powerful tool of expression, uniquely his own. Continuing his preoccupation with matters of art, in *I Am Tired of Language* Jasieński boasts that he is capable of writing like other great artists, but in accordance with his earlier theoretical pronouncements in manifestos he promises to create ‘new art, the art of black cities. It will be strong like vodka and tasty like a gingerbread.’ This simple message is delivered through elaborate means such as irony, comparisons built on provocative imagery, metaphors – frequently used in their primary, that is literal meaning – street jargon, common expressions, and intricate inversions. The poet tells his audience that he is tired and bored with ‘Niagaras of all the tongues’. He brags that he can build ‘cathedrals and brothels with words’, and assures his audience that he knows words which are ‘as swift as roe-deer’. He can be calm and savage, passionate and sophisticated, but being at ‘the crossroad of epochs’ he stands now ‘cynical, with a cigarette in mouth’. In his apartment he has ‘wallpapers [made] of poems and poems [made] of wallpapers’. Down with this art, he exclaims, admitting that today he wants to glorify ‘black’, ignorant and common boors. Both the technique and the theme of the poem *I Am Tired of Language* is developed further in another poem addressed *To Futurists*. It is a poetic ‘manifesto’ which summarises Jasieński’s theory about new art. Playing with words, through puns and inversions, he threateningly rebuffs old philosophers and art of the past:

*Już nas znudzili Platon i Plotyn,
i Charlie Chaplin, i, czary chapel –
rytmicznym szczekiem wszystkich gilotyn
piszę ten apel. (1972:51)*

We are bored by now with Plato and Plotinus,
and Charlie Chaplin, and, mysteries of chapels –

with a rhythmic clang of all the guillotines
 I am writing this appeal.

‘Life in its logicality became demonic and illogical’ he said in the manifesto, offering a cure and a solution to this ‘ghetto of logicality’ by making the public aware that ‘life is a ballet of possibilities and revelations’. His poetry will bring a ‘deluge of miracles and surprises’ – he promises (204). The poem *To Futurists* consolidates theory and practice through the grotesque representation of life in a city:

*Dziwy po mieście skaczą już pierwsze,
 zza krat parków rzeźby wykazują
 kobiety w łóżkach skandują wiersze
 i chodzą z niebieską twarzą
 Po cztery głowy ma każdy z nas.
 Przestrach nad miastem zawisnął niemny.
 Poezja
 z rur się wydziela
 jak gaz. (1972:51)*

First wonders are bouncing already in town,
 sculptures are creeping in parks from behind iron bars,
 women in beds scan poems
 and walk blue-faced.
 Each of us has four heads.
 Mute fear hangs over the city.
 Poetry
 diffuses from pipes
 as gas.

The poet fears the worst: ‘We all shall be destroyed’, but soon his faith in the future leads him to herald the new order:

*Znów bacznie wiosna raz tylko na rok
 i jedno słońce w niebo się wkrości.
 Jak tynk
 oblici ze świata
 barok
 poetyczności. (1972:53)*

Again spring will return for once in a year only
 And only one sun will pimple²² itself in the sky.
 Baroque
 of poeticality
 will fall of the world
 like a plaster.

‘Labels’ put on words by previous poets need to be ripped off to reveal real life.

*Idziemy
 wydrzeć z lawy metafor
 twarz
 rysującą się
 Świata.* (1972:54)

We are going
 to tear out from the lava of metaphors
 emerging
 face
 of the World.

The tone of the poem is serious; it deals with serious issues, close to the poet’s heart. The lyrical ‘I’ relinquishes his artistic vocation and declares unity with the crowd: ‘Let poets go to heaven. I am with you.’ He refuses to be lured by the beauty of romantic landscapes:

*Próżno się wdzięczyć chmurek rokoko,
 na plafon nieba rzucone bazio.
 Nikogo więcej księżyć – gonokok
 tęsknotą nocy nie zarazi.* (1972:53)

Clouds rococo gives its airs and graces in vain,
 catkin thrown over the *plafond*²³ of the sky.
 No longer will the moon-gonococcus
 infect us with the longing for night.

²² *i jedno słonce w niebo się wkrości* – *wkrości* is a neologism derived from *krosta*, meaning ‘a pimple’ but is used as a verb ‘to pimple’ itself into something.

²³ French for *ceiling*, especially one enriched with paintings. (*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1992)

Instead, he will pull like 'a magician' out of his fellow-poet's head what we may call the ingredients of contemporaneity:

[...]
domy,
okrągły,
księżyce
i dragi,
kobietę z dzieckiem,
flagi wszystkich nacji,
bezczenne słowa po dolarze karat. (1972:53)

[...]
houses,
ships,
moons
and dredges,
a woman with child,
flags of all nations,
priceless words for one dollar carat.

Taken as a whole, the above quotation is in the end a bizarre arrangement of incompatible *items*, incompatible because in their own right they belong to distinct, independent categories and yet they are listed together in random order and without any elucidating explanation, illustrating that mental 'jump through the void and *salto mortale*' advocated by Jasieński. Even if to a conventional mind such a list seems illogical, in the incongruous, grotesque world ruled by the laws of its own intrinsic logic it assumes definite significance. This unorthodox synthesis of diverse items reflects the true nature of the modern world, and designates novel parameters of its *new* beauty. It firmly and aptly illustrates Jasieński's belief that the ultimate shape and character of the modern world is derived from a summary of incompatibilities, which in its essence renders it grotesque. This peculiar compilation of objects, concepts, people, and nature is at once a quaint allegory of modern life, and the grotesquely symbolic representation of its diverse aspects, served to the audience without any discriminating intervention of reason. Technically, the poem shows affinity with another artistic movement gaining prominence at that time, namely Surrealism. It also makes use of its artistic means. Surrealism, seen as an artistic method,

may be taken as a mutation of the modern grotesque.²⁴ The poet presents himself as an agent able to gain access to the ‘subconscious depths of the human mind and bring [its elements] to the surface, by expressing them in forms or words with a suitable symbolic apparatus’. At least, such are characteristics of literary Surrealism in the view of the *conservateur-en-chef* of the Louvre, Germain Bazin.²⁵ Another reason to look at this poem in the context of Surrealism is its visual aspect. The poem recalls a profoundly grotesque surrealistic painting, by Salvador Dali²⁶ perhaps, or even more closely to the Slavonic background, paintings by Franciszek Starowieyski, the modern Polish surrealist. The information contained in the immediately preceding fragment completes that picture: the poet-magician orders his friend, Anatol Stern, to lie down, so that the former can perform artistic tricks on him. After breaking his skull with a hammer (whereafter ‘rats will clamber on it’), he promises to pull out of his head those very artefacts of reality quoted above. The ‘reality’ aspect is heightened by the authentic name of a real person; the description of a gruesome act involving his friend is a prank played on Stern by Jasieński, a sadistic image of the split head aims to shock the audience, but this kind of black humour – a ‘perverse glee’, as Mc Elroy would say – announces Jasieński’s curiosity about the gruesome side of existence, which frequently colours his grotesque. But not only that. Reducing the source of Jasieński’s grotesque to his interest in morbidity would deny any deeper meaning to his poetry. Surrealism, with which Jasieński experiments here, enforces the theoretical significance of this poem as one which attacks logic and rationalism. The

²⁴ See: ‘Surrealism can be subsumed within the grotesque as one of its varieties’ (Karlinsky 1976:123). The application of the concept of the grotesque to Surrealism is also discussed by Kayser, including important differences (1981:168-173). Futurism is only an artistic movement, while Surrealism has a dual meaning: it is both a movement which started in 1920 as a continuation of Dadaism, and a method of presenting the world. It is this *method*, where its proximity to the grotesque is noted. Regarding the interrelation between Futurism and Surrealism, Anatol Stern pointed out that although Dadaism was foreign to Futurists as a philosophy in its total and absolute negation of everything, in practice, both movements, especially in the earlier period of Futurism, were showing similar tendencies (1964:46-50).

²⁵ *A History of Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*. New York, 1958:475.

²⁶ For example, his painting *Burning Giraffe*, especially the image of empty drawers sticking out of the leg of a frontal figure, may be interpreted by means of different concepts which everybody can ‘fill in’ according to their own ideas.

poem invites its readers to explore new mysteries of existence, to discover its new kind of beauty.

The Artist and the Mob

*Боже, что за жизнь наша! – Вечный раздор мечты
с существенностью.*

‘Oh, God, what a life! – eternal discord between the dream and reality.’

(Gogol: *Nevsky Prospekt*)

Jasieński demanded that in terms of form and content the new art must be consonant with the times or, more specifically, it must be ‘synthetic’, ‘concise’ and ‘mind-blowing’. His views clearly accord with important aspects of the grotesque. The synthetic character of the grotesque is almost self-explanatory, for the grotesque joins together various, even incompatible elements. The effectiveness of the grotesque in marrying brevity of form with multiple meaning was proved by many artists who used this device in their work. Last but not least, exploiting the emotions of the audience, the grotesque inevitably ends in shaking our belief in order and harmony; it is the *raison d’être* of the grotesque artist to persuade us that life in its never-ending mutation is full of surprises.

In terms of the essence of art, however, Jasieński insisted that it must be ‘human, that is for the people; it must be mass, democratic and universal’ (203). Jasieński epitomised his idea of *human* art in slogans: ‘Artists, take to the streets!’ and ‘Everybody can be an artist!’. (203-204) As time passed and he experienced more and more problems with his audience, he became torn between his ideals and harsh reality. Difficulty in coping with the latter gave rise to a number of grotesque motifs in his poetry. Jasieński’s concept of *human* art embraces its creator as well as its recipient. Initially the artist is a young self-assured egocentric, ahead of others. In the title poem of his first small collection of 1921 he wrote:

*Idę młody, genialny, niosę BUT W BUTONIERCE,
Tym co za mną nie zdąży echopowiem: – Adieu! – (1972:25)*

I walk forward, young, ingenious, carrying a SHOE IN THE BUTTONHOLE,
To those who cannot keep up with me I will echo.²⁷ – Adieu! –

But growing artistically and developing a better understanding of life, Jasieński realised that modern artists have to reckon with an emerging new force, the ‘enlightened proletariat’. Since the only justification for living is labour, artists can no longer be high priests or prophets, but are obliged instead to validate their ‘participation in life’ through hard work (201) – he wrote in one of his manifestos. Building an original analogy, he said that artists are ‘workers’ who differ from rank-and-file proletarians only in that the tool of their trade is the word: they are ‘miners, who drill tunnels in the rocks of contemporaneous consciousness’ (223). But the events of real life infused with a dose of cruelty verified his youthful self-confidence, showing him how difficult it is to achieve the ultimate goal. Futuristic soirées often ended in defeat; ‘the crowd’ either detested or entirely ignored the Futurists. Their behaviour and dress code was often considered offensive, to say the least, while their poems were rejected as irrelevant and too difficult for the uneducated masses – the public responded to their provocative tactics with anger and violence, it refused to get *futurised*.²⁸ The Futurists must have realised at some point that they were not part of the ‘crowd’, not even ahead of it, but rather above it. The constant tussle between the autocratic concept of a prophet and the democratic concept of an artist as one of the crowd, a commoner, is evident in Jasieński’s poetry, and is made

²⁷ Balcerzan interprets the meaning of the neologism *echopowiem*, created from *echo* + the verb *powiem* ‘to say’ in the following way: ‘the neologism can mean: I will say it like an echo; I will say it and go away so fast that you will only hear the echo of my voice’ (in Jasieński 1972:25). The capitalisation of the phrase ‘BUT W BUTONIERCE’ warns the reader about the possibility of alternative interpretations, however. While in the literal sense a shoe in the buttonhole is rather an outlandish image, in the quoted line it can also be interpreted: I am carrying the volume of my poetry (it was published in 1921 under the same title); my poetry is as shocking as the image used for the title, and so on. The implications of these three words and the way they are written in this poem are multifold. Kolesnikoff in her book on Jasieński describes some of the different techniques the poet uses in his ‘play with words’ (1982:27-31).

²⁸ See: Strachocki *Spotkanie z Futurystami* (‘Meeting with the Futurists’) and Wat, *Wspomnienia o Futuryźnie*, (‘Recalling Futurism’), both in Jaworski (1992:308-313; 313-327, respectively).

explicit in the poem *To Futurists*. There the author at one stage expresses the wish to be united with and accepted by people: 'I am with you', but almost immediately afterwards he evokes an image of a poet-martyr, based on an autobiographical allusion, and deliberately juxtaposes images of an 'enraged' crowd and a 'defenceless' poet:

*czekajcie, twarze te skądś znam!
to thum ten sam,
który we mnie w zakopanem
rozjuszony w bezbronnego ciskał jajka i cegły. (1972:92)*

wait, I know these faces!
it is the same crowd,
that in zakopane,²⁹
enraged, at the defenceless threw eggs and bricks.

The incident in question had apparently taken place in the mountain resort Zakopane at the very beginning of Jasieński's Futuristic career. The incident, verified also by his fellow Futurists³⁰ is related in detail by Jasieński in the *Exposé*:

In August 1921 in Zakopane, returning home from a soirée where I had been reading my best poetry, I was accompanied along the whole of Krupówki Boulevard [...] by the listeners who threw stones at me, large enough to split in half the head of an average, and even an above-average mortal (unfortunately it was too dark),³¹ I thought that the judgement of our élite public, expressed summarily after the recital, was generally... too flattering for me. In 1921 lapidation was certainly not one of my ambitions. (1972:219)

By using the Biblical term 'lapidation', Jasieński put himself again on a level with martyrs, and through this concept of martyrdom the case of Christ becomes immediately relevant.

²⁹ Zakopane is a small town in the Tatra mountains region not far from Cracow. In accordance with Futuristic poetics Jasieński frequently writes proper names with lower case letters. The translation retains the lower case of the original text.

³⁰ See also: Wat, *Recalling Futurism* (in Jaworski 1992:320). Judging by the frequency with which Jasieński recalls this incident, we may assume that it was of paramount importance to him. The fact that he wanted to serve people and that he kept being rejected was one of the most painful characteristics of his artistic career.

³¹ The irony intended; in the original: (*niestety, było zbyt ciemno*).

The essence of the poet's suffering lies in the fact that his 'best' poetry is brutally rejected, in the same way as Christ's offer to deliver people from their sins. The way in which Jasieński builds the poet-Christ analogy shows his vulnerability to critical opinion and throws light on his sensitive nature. Compelled to create in accordance with his artistic intuition he could not bear rejection; on the other hand, when the audience applauded him, he attacked them with disdain.³²

*a w oświetłonej sali tow. higienicznego
histeryczne studentki i gawiedź
oklaskując ziewająca estradę,
[...]
twarz krwiąca im zachwytu nabiegły
nalane. (1972:92)*

when in a well-lit hall of the soc. of hygiene³³
hysterical female students and a mob
applaud the bored artists,
[...]
their pudding faces are shot with the blood
of ecstasy.

This indecisiveness in choosing a role for the artist, either being one of the crowd or its prophet, is borne out by the fact that both appear attractive to the poet. Becoming a popular tribune, apart from being in line with his 'leftist' sympathy for the downtrodden, promised the immediate reward of wide acclaim: 'we will surface on the waves of your arms and your shoulders' as he said in the poem *Hostages* (60), while being a prophet, although artistically more inspiring, meant suffering and isolation.

³² See the *Exposé...*: 'The public was thus unjust, thinking that I do not appreciate its rôle in my creative development. On the contrary, I see it as a constant regulator of my creativity, something of a safety valve which regulates the value of the work produced by myself.' The message disguised in the sarcastic and ambiguous tone of this paragraph is: *I must not write what the public likes*. This contradiction in Jasieński's attitude to his audience is noted by Dziarnowska (1992:67-70).

³³ According to the information provided by Balcerzan, the Society of Hygiene in Warsaw frequently rented out its hall for Futuristic literary soirées (in Jasieński 1972:92).

The most immediate prophetic figure is that of Christ. Thus, in a number of poems, Jasieński explicitly identifies with Christ, implying that he considers artists to be more than mere teachers; he wants them also to be saviours whose role is to liberate or even redeem people. In *I Am Tired of Language* he promises: 'I will create for you the new art...!' which in the context of his Futuristic programmes means: 'I will save you.' The subsequent cry: *Thumie, coś mnie okrażył i chciał bić laskami* ('People, you, who surrounded me and wanted to beat me up with your walking sticks') means 'you have rejected me'. The lofty tone and syntactic similarity of this evocation imitates a well-known Polish religious Easter song, which begins with Christ's rhetorical question-reproach: *Ludu mój, ludu, cóżem ci uczyni?!* ('People, my people, what [wrongs] have I done to you?').

It should be mentioned at this point that, as Jaworski rightly notes, the avant-garde as a rule was secular (1992:67) and the image of Christ, recurring in Jasieński's poetry, does not contradict this statement. Christ is a symbol of innocence, generosity, forgiveness and redemption, hence its appeal to the humanist in Jasieński. But he was aware that the idea of Christ is in itself ambivalent, for Christ is both God and man. As an archetypal image of human suffering, the image of Christ was particularly appealing to the poet's imagination, but when identified with the institution of God, Christ was unequivocally rejected, and Christ's ultimate goodness and justice was questioned again on humanitarian grounds, especially when it was identified with the hierarchy of the Church. Anarchistically-inclined Futurists were eager to reject any old structures and institutions, especially those that were instrumental in the oppression of the masses, if not directly, then through covering up for the oppressors. These overtones sound prominently in a number of poems, and a quotation from *A Song about Hunger* illustrates the point:

*a wieczorem
z czarnego oszalałego miasta,
z katedry,
ciemnymi zaułkami wśród śpiewów i świstu
w pole płaszczu kryjąc twarz
uciekał chrystus,
gdy nagle tłum go na placu*

*dopadł.
 pochwycili go za ręce,
 zawlekli.
 czarni obdarci ludzie od kielni i łopat.
 zaciągneli krzyczącego,
 boso,
 na róg,
 na miejscu samosąd.
 kucharki zachrypnięte podnosili pieści:
 – za nasz krzywde!
 – za nasze córki, co się poszły po hotelach łajdaczyć!
 – za nasze stare zharowane matki!
 – za naszą harię przepiąkanych mąk,
 – za któryś dzwonkiem zagłuszał i karmił opłatkim!
 kułakami, laskami, zabili, zatłukli.
 poturbowane, umęczone ciało
 upadło pod razami spracowanych rąk. (1972:90-91)*

and at night
 out of the black mad city,
 out of the cathedral,
 along dark alleys amidst the chanting and zip [of bullets]
 hiding his face in the skirts of his coat
 christ was running away,
 when suddenly the crowd caught up with him
 on the square.
 they snatched his hands,
 they grabbed him.
 clothed in rags black people from trowels and shovels.
 they dragged him screaming,
 barefoot,
 to the corner,
 instant mob law.
 cooks with hoarse voices were wielding fists:
 – for our suffering!
 – for our daughters, that prostitute themselves in second-rate hotels!
 – for our old, exhausted mothers!
 – for the shame of our despair,
 – which you silenced with the bell and fed with a wafer!
 with fists, sticks, they killed him, clubbed him to death.
 [his] battered, tortured body
 fell down under the blows of toil-worn hands.

Christ is identified here with the institution of the Church through the reference to Holy Communion, and his death is politicised: it is presented not as an act signifying the redemption of all people but as a retaliation for suffering, retaliation justified by the

persecuted and pathetic existence of the masses. Jasieński's dual attitude to Christ is in its essence grotesque, for he cannot reconcile in his image a man, the elevated symbol of martyrdom ('battered, tortured body'), and God, the eternal symbol of tyranny.

Jasieński's indecisiveness in delineating his own role as an artist is matched by his ambivalent attitude to the addressee, namely to the poet's audience. The audience is thus a two-faced creature, one of whose faces belongs to a crowd of people and the other to the repulsive 'mob'. Initially, the poet is eager to identify with the first face: he woos the people with promises to lead them to the future, to create a new art for them, to glorify them. In the manifesto he embraces 'the new people whom the World War has thrown to the surface, and who are not infected yet by the *lues*³⁴ of civilisation'. On behalf of all Futurists he extends a 'brotherly hand' to them (207). As a poet, Jasieński is both sympathetic to the 'nameless, starved-to-death millions of city dwellers' (78), and nauseated by the 'sore tumour of the crowd' (26), or, as he put it elsewhere, the 'black, ignorant and uneducated' mob of boors (49). In the poem *I Am Tired of Language* he addresses 'an ecstatic crowd', seeing in it a school of life and an inspiration for himself:

*Ręce wasze potworne, pokrъcone palce,
Gigantyczne, czerwone, obrośnięte maki,
[...]
więcej mówią mi jedne niż cały Słowacki!* (1972:49)

Your monstrous hands, twisted fingers,
Gigantic, red, hairy tentacles,
[...]
tell me more than the whole of Słowacki!³⁵

In the poem *Hostages* he places his trust in the crowd as an agent that will elevate artists and give them fame:

³⁴ *lues venerea* – syphilis.

³⁵ Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849) one of Poland's greatest Romantic poets.

*Przyjdzie dzień twój –
o tłumie!
[...]
Wypłyniemy
na falach twoich ramion
i bar twych – (1972:60)*

Your day will come –
oh crowd!
[...]
We will surface
on the waves of your arms
and your shoulders –

But, directed at the future, Jasieński's apotheosis of the masses is undermined by the repulsive imagery he employs, and this prevents us from seeing his commitment to the leftist ideology as fully formed at this stage. At one point it looks as if the distinction between the 'crowd' and the 'mob' is clear, the former being associated with the working masses and the latter with the class most despised by the poet, the crowd of middle-class townsmen who threw eggs, stones and bricks at the 'prophets' of the new art during their recitals. But Jasieński's consistently applied strategy of contradiction more often than not makes his representation of the masses equivocal. In the same context, in the same line, standing side by side, are words which in a conventional text are not seen together, for they refuse to form a coherent whole. The most conspicuous in its mixture of abuse and admiration is the following stanza from *I Am Tired of Language*:

*O ekstatyczny tłumie żarty przez syfilis!
Zaropiałe, cuchnące, owrzodzone bydło!
Kiedy w czarnym pochodzie nade mną się schylisz?
Wszystko mnie już zmęczyło i wszystko obrzydło! (1972:49)*

Oh ecstatic mob,³⁶ devoured by syphilis!
Suppurating, noisome, ulcerated cattle!
When will you lean over me in your black procession?
Everything tired me out, everything became disgusting!

³⁶ In Polish: *tłum*; according to a Polish-English dictionary it means both crowd and mob (J. Stanisławski, *Podręczny słownik polsko-angielski*. Warszawa, 1981)

Despite the lexicon of abuse exploited in the first two lines, the poet longs to be noticed by this crowd – ‘when you will lean over me?’ is an imploration, for he knows that only the crowd is able to ‘carry him on the wave of its arms’ to fame and glory. The rapid change in tone from abuse to a humble request leaves the reader flabbergasted and almost helpless in confrontation with the last line of this stanza. How should we interpret it? Is it the confession of an unhappy person or the whining of a spoiled child, or perhaps the words of someone who has reached his wits’ end? This ambivalence is exactly the aim of the mischievous grotesque discourse – to prevent the reader from being indifferent. The ‘enormous black mass, terrifying and magnificent’ (50), though alluring and indispensable, arouses the poet’s disgust. His attitude to the crowd is provocative, he woos it, seeks its admiration, and at the same time antagonises it through the use of outrageously abusive terminology. In the end, most of references to the crowd in Jasieński’s poetry are infected with contradictions: admiration is blended with disgust, triviality with exaltation. The terminology which contextualises the crowd in his poetry is ominous, especially where the poet alludes, through images of blood and revolution, to the mob as an upcoming potent social and political force. This comes through in the disquieting overtones of the poem *I Am Tired of Language*:

[...]

*thum czarny się przewala jak olbrzymi wąż,
zapładniając brzuchate, tłustopiersie samki.*

*Będą rodzić pod płotem, pod próg, byle gdzie
malutkich czarnych ludzi sine od bolesci*

[...]

*Wylejecie zatorem za rogatki bram
olbrzymia czarna masa, straszna i wspaniała,
i sto tysięcy pięknych, wypieszczonych dam
odda wam swoje białe i pachnące ciała.*

*Rozsypiecie się morzem wielobarwnym, pstrym,
na wszystko spadnie z góry wasz miażdżący młotek
i pociągnie za wami popielaty dym
z tysiącletnich wszechnic i czarnych bibliotek,*

*Chodźcie, Chodźcie tu wszyscy! Pasowi! We krwi!
O Tłumie! O Motłochu! Tytanie! Narodzie!
[...] (1972:49-51)*

[...]

Black crowd is pulsating³⁷ like a giant snake,
inseminating big-bellied, fat-breasted females.

Blue from the pain, they will give birth to little black people
near fences, on house thresholds, anywhere.

[...]

Enormous black mass, terrifying and magnificent,
you will pour out of the city's gates
and one hundred thousand beautiful, delicate ladies
will offer their white and fragrant bodies to you.

You will scatter like a gaudy, multicoloured sea,
your smashing hammer will fall over everything
and grey ash smoke will follow you
from the thousand years old universities and black libraries.

Come! Come all of you! Crimson! In blood!

Oh Crowd! Oh Mob! Titan! Nation!

[...]

The ‘crowd/mob’, a sociological phenomenon, is captured by the poet in a crucial historical moment, in its process of becoming a mass, and assuming the significance of a political phenomenon. But Jasieński’s attitude to it is clearly divided; being a young enthusiastic Futurist, he admires it wholeheartedly while as an educated intellectual brought up in petty-bourgeois milieu he fears its elemental brute power.

‘Life in its constant strenuous mutation...’

Critics who recognise grotesque elements in Jasieński’s poetry (for instance Kolesnikoff 1982; Carpenter 1983), look to Balcerzan for justification of their views. In the introduction to his volume of Jasieński’s poetry, Balcerzan offers a theory that according

³⁷ In the original: *tłum czarny się przewala jak olbrzymi wąż, przewala się* – colloquial.

to the principle of ‘attraction of opposites’, elements of the two opposing concepts of art, namely Futurism and Expressionism, were in the end, permeating one another and ‘dissimilarities were growing similar’. Balcerzan maintains that:

The expressionistic point of departure could lead to Futuristic effects, meaning that in an artistic portrayal the deformed matter was starting to live autonomously, that from the chaos a new order of things was developing. And vice versa, the Futuristic point of departure could lead to Expressionistic solutions. ‘Spirit’ degraded and ‘humiliated’ by matter could become reborn in that matter and impose on it a new, almost ‘mystic’ sense. In effect Jasieński’s Futurism was, indeed, sometimes expressionistic. (In Jasieński 1972:LV)

Balcerzan raises an important point, although his argument is not developed nor it is adequately illustrated with relevant examples. From the point of view of the grotesque aspect in Jasieński’s writing, however, it deserves further attention. Indeed, the tension between the two aesthetics, Futuristic and Expressionistic,³⁸ is continuously present, not only in the poetry, but even in many of Jasieński’s later works, especially *The Ball of the Mannequins* and *The Nose*. The grotesque frequently has its source in that tension.

Characterising Expressionism in the introduction to his anthology of avant-garde movements, Jaworski writes that it ‘acknowledges crisis, opposes reality, and voices the antagonistic relationship between spirit and matter’ (1992:36). He says that the rebellion promoted by the Expressionists was social, moral and intellectual in its character. It was directed at a society whose norms destroyed individuality and spiritual values and ordered them to hide under the mask of convention. In building their vision of the new world, the Expressionists reached out to the mythic beginnings and ideals of a primitive commune. Judging by its most frequent themes – the horror of war, a dilapidated and demoralised urban environment, and oppressive civilisation (see Jaworski 1992:36) – Expressionism was in its essence pessimistic, negative, and focused on the past and present. Futurism, on

³⁸ For Jasieński there was no contradiction in what is said here. In principle, he rejected all artistic schools in his own unique way: ‘Cubism, Expressionism, Primitivism, Dadaism outbid all -isms. The only remaining option as an artistic current is onanism’ (210). Choosing freedom and artistic intuition he could create in a way he himself deemed fit, not having to worry about schools and trends. Futurism was for him a state of consciousness (see Chapter III).

the contrary, was essentially optimistic, positive and future-orientated – such was the tone of Jasieński's manifestos. In his poetry, however, themes vary, but the threatening atmosphere is repeatedly enforced by the style and imagery, showing that the poet's attitude to the world was akin to that of the Expressionists. This allows us to conclude that in theory Jasieński embraced Futurism, but in practice he was much more comfortable with Expressionism, especially with its tendency to paint an apocalyptic vision of the world. Both aesthetics relied to a large extent on the grotesque as their chief mode of expression, although for different reasons. Futurism accepted it as part of its strategy, Expressionism as a mode of representation, in Jaworski's view, includes: 'deformation of reality, vehement pronouncements, contrast, dissonance, ugliness'. In poetry Expressionism was characterised, he continues, by boldness of imagery, sometimes even offensive in common judgement, by sudden a change of planes, a pathetic, often prophetic, tone. In their poetic language the Expressionists emphasised its *expressiveness* which is why sentences in their poems are short, while colours and sounds are vivid (Jaworski 1992:37). For Jasieński Expressionism is a technique which corresponds with his own perception of reality. However, it is an artistic convention, which in his application lost essential ties with the philosophy which gave birth to it, because it does not have the metaphysical conditioning of the movement itself. The essence of Jasieński's grotesque portrayal of the world should be seen as rooted both in the Expressionistic dissatisfaction with life and in the Futuristic call to rebel against tradition. Moreover, the grotesque granted Jasieński the possibility to create a new logic consonant with the times and simultaneously responding to the need to shake up the audience.

In Jasieński's view life predetermined art, in the sense that the former provided an inspiration and, more importantly, the material which artists process into artistic forms. He understood life not so much as a notion of being alive but rather as a manner of existence, and frequently identified it with reality itself. In the *Manifesto on Futuristic Poetry* he wrote:

Pochwalamy życie, które jest wiecznym mozołnym zmienianiem się – ruch, motłoch,³⁹ kanalizację i Miasto. (1972:214)

We cherish life in its constant strenuous mutation: movement, mob, sewerage system, and City.

The grotesque underlying this selection intends to shock, but also to tease the public's aesthetic taste: a mob, but especially a sewerage system, are the last things one would expect to arouse a poets' inspiration. But there is more to it than merely the intention to shock. The quotation proves that as an artist Jasieński accepted life as a condition blending low with high, trivial with elevated, abstract with tangible. In principle, the eternal goal of art is to represent life in its true dimension; focusing only on static self-satisfaction, on the lives of the élite, on the spiritual aspects of living in a bucolic sentimentalised setting represents, in his view, a falsified image of contemporaneity. The implied message of Jasieński's words is that, in their striving to represent life, artists can no longer ignore previously neglected aspects of reality which for him are embodied by the movement, the mob and the city. In other words, artists must embrace 'Heraclitean everything', as he put it in *A Song about Hunger* (77).

Jasieński wants us to believe that he accepts ('we cherish') and shares the Futuristic cult of the city, technology, and civilisation. But his poetry proves the contrary. The image of the city which emerges from his poems is identical to the one characterised by Jaworski as expressionistic, namely as 'an ugly place, an anthill, where a human being is robbed of any individuality' (1992:37). Jasieński himself cried in one of his poems:

*o niewiadomi, bezimienni ludzie,
zagłodzeni w saharach milionowych miast,
którym nie miał kto podać nawet bułki z masłem.
o wasze sine, popuchnięte trupy,
jak o własne,
upomni się żarłoczne, wszystkożerne Miasto* (1972:78)

³⁹ In poetry Jasieński used *thum* which, as noted, means both crowd and mob. Here, however, he uses the definitely pejorative term *motłoch*, meaning: mob, rabble, populace.

oh unknown, nameless people,
 starved to death in the saharas of densely populated cities,
 where there is none to offer you a slice of bread with butter.
 the voracious, omnivorous City
 will seek your purple-blue, swollen corpses,
 as if they were its own.

The reference to the city being a desert becomes a powerful ironic statement that the urban crowd is largely faceless and there is no chance of help. For Jasieński such is the 'City', distinguished by the capital letter, which he considers the embodiment of modern life. He sees it not as a settlement or magisterial district, but gives it the status of a living organism, with face, lungs, hands and excretory system. His city pulsates and suffers; it is a factory of people and a crucible. The poet chooses to portray his city in terms of anatomy: the pulsating *arteries*⁴⁰ of streets (29); tarmac, parched and russet like *blood* (30); *belly* of cities (30); the black *throat* of a street (66); ruins grin *teeth* of blind windows (69); voracious, omnivorous City (78); over its black *face*, ploughed with rails, run *tears* of tramways (79, all emphasis added). Being a living organism, the city can suffer. The city, and the mob which is both its blood stream (29) and a tumour which rots on its body (26), provides Jasieński with an unfailing source of the grotesque: it is 'stylistic and thematic [and] it permeates his imagery' as noted in passing by Carpenter (1983:36). In the poet's view it is the character of contemporaneous reality 'on the verge of hallucination' (222) and justifies its representation as the intensely gloomy vault concealing 'the tremendous secret':

*o, nadzwyczajne wypadki.
 samobójstwa. podrzucenia. katastrofy.
 krótkie spięcia, tajemnicze pożary.
 czarne strajki, rozstrzelania, napady.
 jaką ogromną kryje się w was tajemnica.
 nieprzethumaczalna.
 tajemnica pulsujących miast.
 krzyczy w was ukrzyżowana ulica.
 żywe, odpreparowane od naskórka mięso.* (1972:77)

⁴⁰ The poet speaks of *tgtnice*, which in Polish is strictly an anatomical term.

oh, extraordinary accidents.
 suicides. abandonments. catastrophes.
 collisions. mysterious fires.
 black strikes, executions, attacks.
 what a tremendous secret is hidden in you.
 untranslatable.
 the secret of pulsating cities.
 your crucified street screams.
 alive, meat cut from the skin.

It should be mentioned at this point that for Jasieński 'the city' was Cracow, where he came to study.⁴¹ The slow-paced provincial life of this Galician capital was in the grip of a demographic crisis caused by the influx of masses migrating in search of the means to sustain their existence. A flood of uneducated, unskilled peasants, many of them young girls, altered the urban landscape of Cracow, this 'city-mausoleum, a *panopticum* of national mummies' as Jasieński called it (223). The human tragedy, oozing from every corner of this city had a powerful impact on the young poet. Moreover, having a brother⁴² studying at the medical school, Jasieński had access to a mortuary, and perhaps even to dissecting-rooms, which further exposed him to the seedy side of human existence, so evident in his gruesome imagery and direct reference:

*czarne, natłoczone prosektoria
 wyeksploatują wasze zwłoki,
 rozdłubią resztki waszych ciał od kości.* (1972:78)

⁴¹ Carpenter attributes Jasieński's 'fascination with the morbid, criminal, and sensational side of life' to the literature on the subject, 'especially Russian literature from Dostoevsky to Mayakovsky' and not to 'his personal experience' (1983:37). Dziarnowska, on the other hand, is adamant that it was the peculiar atmosphere of Cracow which supplied the poet with personal experience, which she justifies by reference to the content and occasionally even to a form of some of his poems (1982:29-31). Obviously, both literary tradition and personal experience played an important rôle in Jasieński's portrayal of the city. It has to be pointed out, however, that in his portrayal of the urban environment Jasieński could be equally influenced by Expressionist poetry written in German. Dziarnowska notes that he knew German and even, as a schoolboy, translated Schiller's poems (*ibid.*:11, 207). At least two famous Expressionists, Georg Trakl who lived in Galicia for a short period, and even wrote a poem about one of its provincial towns, Grodki, and Gottfried Benn, could influence Jasieński. G. Trakl, *Selected Poems*. London 1968:12; for Ben, see A. P. Derick *Gotfried Ben and his Critics: Major Interpretations 1912-1992*. Drawer 1992. See further comments to the image of rats in Jasieński's poetry, in footnote 51 below.

⁴² Jerzy, older brother of the poet.

black, crowded dissecting-rooms
 will exploit your cadavers,
 will carve the remnants of your flesh from the bones.

The urban landscape with all its requisites symbolised by the ‘movement’ (cars, tramways, coaches), ‘sewage’ (accidents, perversion, suicides), ‘mob’ (crowds of people, lumpen-proletariat, workers) is for Jasieński the stage, ‘a theatre’, where all these requisites interact with one another; it is ‘a true unadulterated theatre of life, multicoloured, Heraclitean everything’, which has greater impact on a modern man than the individual tragedies of the past: ‘I sleep when desdemona is murdered’. The reference to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus gains momentum – life is constant change, as in the theatre one scene is replaced by another.⁴³ By analogy with the theatre, life in the city becomes a ‘gratuitous spectacle’ for the mob of people who silently watch ‘the heavy ballet of death’ of a horse dying on the pavement (77).

Jasieński uses various methods in rendering life grotesque, especially the life in the city. In the quotations above, all taken from *A Song about Hunger*, the grotesque is present in the accretion of gruesome details, in morbid imagery, and in the emphasis on all-pervasive ambivalence. In the equivocal grotesque world nothing has only one face, thus the city, the centre of Jasieński’s universe, apart from being a ‘pulsating’ and ‘omnivorous’ monster, is at the same time the epitome of human suffering. In Jasieński’s cultural paradigm the ultimate suffering is always identified with the crucifixion of Christ, as illustrated in *A Song about Hunger*:

⁴³ Commenting on *heraklitowskie wszysktko* in the poem, Balcerzan explains that Heraclitus represented reality as an ‘infinite flux of events, which are in a constant confrontation of opposites’ (in Jasieński 1972:77) Balcerzan combines in one two points of Heraclitean philosophy, one transpiring from the so-called ‘metaphor of strife’ (‘One must know that war is common and right is strife and that all things are happening by strife and necessity’ (in Kirk 1962:238), and the other from the ‘river analogy’ which is widely known as a saying that you cannot step twice into the same river (see ibid.:366-384). G. S. Kirk’s interpretation of both ‘fragments’ in *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* may be understood as an idea that ‘nothing remains stable for long, all things eventually change, in no part of the world is everything stable’ and that ‘the unity of opposites is destroyed if strife ceases’ (ibid.:244).

z odrzuonymi bezwładnie
 rękami
 ulic
 leżało Miasto krzyżem.
 przybili go do ziemi ćwiekami lamp,
 jarzące białe gwoździe wżarły się,
 jak krzyki.
 przyszła noc
 i przylgnęła do krwawych ramp
 palącą chustą weroniki. (1972:79)

with spread apart palsied
 hands
 of its streets
 the City was lying cross-like.
 it was nailed to the ground with hobnails of lamps,
 glowing white nails bite
 like shouts.
 the night came
 and embraced bloody wounds⁴⁴
 like a burning cloth of the veronica.

The grotesque in this fragment is derived from a confusion between the sublime and the ordinary (Christ and the city), but it is also seen in the personification of the city. The metaphor of streets being the cross on which the body of Christ is stretched is grotesquely effective in that it profanes the sacred image of crucifixion, and the fact that it smacks of blasphemy only intensifies its grotesquely disquieting effect.

In sustaining the ambivalent atmosphere, the poet frequently turns to nature playing havoc with reality, as in the case of the 1921 poem *Miasto* ‘The City’. The brutality of the urban environment is underscored by constant reference to the equally oppressive elements. Six out of ten parts begin with a reference to rain. In weather like this, one would expect people to rejoice in family life in warm cosy homes. But in the poem, the only warm cosy

⁴⁴ See the original: *i przylgnęła do krwawych ramp palącą hustą weroniki*. Building his metaphor, the poet plays with the parallel: *lamps* – hobnails leading to wounds in the body of the city and Christ respectively. As he uses it, the word *ramp* (foot-lights), phonetically resembles another word: *ran*, meaning ‘wounds’, which comes naturally in this context. In translating I decided to focus on the implied meaning, transpiring from the sound, considering the logical meaning of *ramp* less relevant.

house is a bordello. In the grotesque universe things are not what they seem. The action of the poem is set against a 'pitch-dark' night which further diminishes the chance of clear definition and delimitation. The night casts its ominous spell over the city. Apart from an ineffective policeman and a few notorious drunkards, a car is noted, wilfully hostile, loud and smelly (63). Another vehicle, an ambulance, which appears from the 'black throat of the street' is also rendered in a manner that places it within the realm of the grotesque. It rushes phantom-like, silently 'paving the road' with its yellow lights and 'sniffing' for a tragedy (67). But in this poem neither vehicles nor machines turn out to be the chief grotesque images. Surprisingly this role is given to lamps, commonly accepted as obvious accessories of a civilised urban landscape, whose light is meant to guide people through the night. But that is *commonly*, for the writers of the grotesque exploit lamps in full realisation of their potential for creating an uncanny ambiance, altering everything on which they cast their light. Gogol, for one, in *Невский проспект* ('Nevsky Prospekt') wrote: 'Further, my goodness, further from a lamp! and faster, as fast as you can, pass it by', believing, that 'the devil himself lights lamps, only to show everything not in its real shape and form'.⁴⁵ In Jasieński's poem, on the other hand, the light of a lamp is used not to 'deceive' as in Gogol, but to heighten reality, to expose its brutal essence. The artificial light of lamps accompanies illness, death, and perverse sex. Is this the reason then that in consequence of seeing it all, in *The City* lamps go into some kind of a phantasmagoric frenzy?

*Znowu ucichło.
Deszcz lunął gestszy.
Zegar na wieży wybił trzy.
W imię Ojca i Syna!!
A to co!? ...
Na skrącie ulic
Lampy migocą
Lampy. Lampy. Lampy.
Wysypały zza węgla łańcuchem.
Białe. Oszalałe.*

⁴⁵ Далее, ради бога, далее от фонаря! и скорее, сколько можно скорее, проходите мимо. [...] сам демон зажигает лампы для того только, чтобы показать все не в настоящем виде (N. V. Gogol, Собрание сочинений. Москва, 1936:236).

*Biegną gdzieś, uciekają gdzieś, lecą parami
 Ulicami. Bulwarami.
 Nie zakręcą ni razu.
 Raz – dwa – trzy! Raz – dwa – trzy!
 Idzie mazur.
 Para za parą! Para za parą!
 En avant!
 Eh, zimno!
 Przeleciały armią szybką, stulicą
 Nad zziębniętą ogłupiałą ulicą
 Zarzuciły lysę głowy
 Na bakier.
 Żegna się w trwodze posterunkowy
 I spóźniony fiakier.
 Popędziły dalej w tariku,
 Wywijany długi łańcuch,
 Ulicami.
 Za ulkami.
 Bulwarami.
 Zapędziły się na most nad rzekę
 W wodzie szarej i sinej
 Przeglądając lysiny.
 Lampy. Lampy. Lampy...
 Na moście stał jeden,
 Trzymał się rampy,
 Wymiotowały czarną wodę żółte bluzgi.
 Blask mu oświetla żółty profil starczy...
 Pod mostem woda bulgoce.
 Przewala się. Jęczy.
 Wzdycha i warczy.
 Woda. (1972:67-68)*

Again is quiet.
 Rain is pouring more thickly.
 The tower clock struck three.
 In the name of the Father and the Son!!
 What's that!? ...
 At the street-bend
 Lamps are flickering.
 Lamps. Lamps. Lamps.
 They poured from behind the corner in a chain.
 White. Insane.
 They sprint somewhere, run away somewhere, race in pairs
 Through streets. Boulevards.
 They don't turn even once.
 One – two – three! One – two – three!
 There goes a mazurka.
 Pair after pair! Pair after pair!

*En avant!*⁴⁶

Eh, it's cold!
 Multi-faced, like a fast army fleet
 They flew above a cold stupefied street.
 Throwing their bald heads
 Aslant.
 A frightened constable and belated coachman
 Make the sign of the cross.
 They rushed further dancing
 Briskly, in a long chain,
 Through streets,
 Through alleys
 Through boulevards.
 They came all the way up to the bridge on the river,
 Checking their baldness
 In a greyish-purple water.
 Lamps. Lamps. Lamps...
 There was a fellow on the bridge,
 He held on to a balustrade,
 Throwing up into black waters his yellow spurts.⁴⁷
 The brightness exposed his yellow profile of an old man...
 Under the bridge the water gurgles.
 Pulsates. Moans.
 Sights and barks.
 Water.

As the last quoted fragment illustrated, the ambivalence is sustained, and exploited. The reader is not in a position to resolve whether it is the world that has gone mad, or whether, considering the unexpected finale of the quoted fragment, the mazurka performed by lamps takes place in the hallucinating mind of a drunken man. Apart from introducing an element of confusion, this scene, evoking disgust, has other functions too. It shocks with its naturalism, but more importantly it allows the poet to bring readers back down to earth, just in case they started drifting into the phantasmagoric rather than the earthly shape of things.

As we have noted, the most obvious examples of the grotesque can be attributed to the disparity between the tone and the content, or confusion between the appearance of the

⁴⁶ 'Forward!'

⁴⁷ In the original: *bluzgi* – a neologism formed from a verb *bluzgać*, meaning 'to spurt'.

image and its substance, or occasionally by the emphasis on the extreme, leading to a lopsided deformed picture of life, so, in the above quotation, lamps function in a kind of grotesque, surrealistic delirium. The reversal of the customary laws of nature, which require lamps to stay put along the streets while people move, is apparent in Jasieński's poem, for the lamps engage in an incongruous but elaborate performance, in one instance turning the world upside down. Painting a surreal picture of the nocturnal landscape, Jasieński aims to reveal the real in reality, that real which in most cases and for various reasons – whether egoism, false morality, hypocrisy, or even simple opportunism – is pushed out of our consciousness.

The grotesque effect is frequently achieved by the discord between the tone or style and the events related, as in the poem *Morga* ('The Morgue'), carrying the dedication: 'To Jerzy if he wants'. The quiet withdrawn narration relates the death of a woman, an insignificant end to an insignificant meaningless life. The incident is not even deserving of the word 'death' itself; it is referred to as 'something happened' and 'some people' came to 'remove something heavy', 'some inquisitive people looked, asked...', 'some conversation was heard'. Although the dead woman remains nameless, her ignoble occupation is identified:

*Przystanęło kilku ciekawych.
Patrzyli. Pytali.
Dolatływały pojedyncze słowa.
Jakaś rozmowa urywana, krótka,
Prowadzona ściszoną staccatą...
... 25 lat ... Prostytutka...
... sublimatem ... (1972:8)*

Some curious [people] stopped.
Looked. Asked.
Single words were heard.
A conversation, brief,
in a hushed *staccato*...
... 25 years ... Prostitute...
... with a sublimate⁴⁸ ...

⁴⁸ *Sublimate* – a chemical substance received in a process of sublimation.

The poem imitates the conversation, words which are not heard are given as dots. In the process of interpretation the dots are ‘filled in’ with the readers own meaning. The poem creates ‘a scenario’ – the whole tragedy materialises in the reader’s mind:

*Klucz zgrzytnął w zamku...
Jeszcze ciche oddalone głosy...
Jeszcze kroki cichające na górę...
(... Jak myśli ... jak myśli ...) (1972:8)*

A key rasped in the lock...
Still the quiet distant voices...
Still soft steps going upwards...
(... Like thoughts ... like thoughts ...) ⁴⁹

As in life, after her death the woman is treated as a leper: even in the morgue she was put apart from other corpses. The tranquil and unemotional tone of the poem is in striking discord with the individual tragedy, the loss of life, even if we accept that her actual death changed little for the young woman herself, for her life was lost long before she died, when she was stigmatised by her ‘trade’ and remained a nameless outsider. The calm narration in a reserved, vague style, mocks the calmness of death, the undertakers are doing their work routinely, without a trace of sympathy (‘they loudly blew their noses’). In the light of a lamp everything looks almost unreal: ‘(... The dance of shadows...)’ (8). But it is real, we may say ‘excessively real’⁵⁰ by which, again, the true nature of reality, that is its relentless brutality, is exposed. Consequently, after making an almost philosophical digression regarding the absolute character of death –

⁴⁹ In the original: ‘(... Jak myśli ... jak myśli ...)’, where *myśli* is both a noun (‘thoughts’) and a verb in the third person singular from ‘to think’. Carpenter translates this line as ‘(... As she thinks ... as she thinks ...)’ (1983:38). Both logically and stylistically her translation is awkward. There is no logical or grammatical reason to treat this phrase as verbal (‘as’ would need the pronoun *kiedy*), and there is no point of reference for it (who is *she*?). *Jak myśli* is a simile (*jak* = ‘like’), it is a reflection which zips through (the observer’s?, reader’s?, the poet’s?) mind that painful thoughts will eventually calm down, like steps that disappear in the distance.

⁵⁰ The term is borrowed from Kayser (1981:158-159).

I nic...
Cisza...
Ciemno...
Zostawili SAMĄ, zupełnie SAMĄ...
Samą jedną na uboczu. (1972:8-9)

And nothing...
 Silence...
 Darkness...
 They left her ALONE, completely ALONE ...
 By herself only, on the side.

– the poet introduces rats into the picture, literally sending chills through one's spine. The motif of rats is at first introduced in uncertain terms:

Coś czarnego mignęło... przepadło...
Może szczur? ... Może cień z ulicy? ... (1972:8)

Something black flits by... disappeared...
 Maybe a rat?... Maybe a shadow from the street?...

But later the presence of rats becomes definite:

Z kąta błysnęła para zielonkawych oczu ...
Jedna ... Druga ...
Wpatrywały się długo, badawczo ...

Coś szaleścila po mokrej kamiennej podłodze ... (1972:9)

From the corner a pair of greenish eyes flashed ...
 One... A second ...
 Their stare was long, scrutinising ...

Something rustled on the wet stone floor ...

The cruelty of the death forces us to feel sympathy for the dead, and the poet deliberately leads us towards such an effect. Aesthetically the poem conforms to the Expressionistic code: it emphasises the ultimate unsightly aspects of physical death. One may argue, though, that philosophically the poem promotes the Futuristic tendency to focus on the

material rather than on the spiritual dimension of death. The image of a rat⁵¹ in the vicinity of the corpse epitomises this dichotomy, for its role in the poem is dual: it aims to shake aesthetic custom and to emphasise the ultimate defeat and ‘humiliation’ of the spirit (Futurism), and to enhance the expressive force of the poem (Expressionism).

As a whole the poem evokes yet another insignificant episode played out on the stage of city life. The discord between the tone withdrawn, yet full of objectively reported obscene details emphasising the physicality of existence, and the character of events reported – all make us think of a camera operator. How often, looking at pictures of horror, we think – why don’t they rush to help? And yet they do not, they hold tight to their cameras and capture the tragedy as it unravels. In search of the artistic technique most suited to the times, Jasieński reaches out to cinematography, the only truly modern art form.⁵² The technique used by cinematography had no past, no tradition. One can only imagine how

⁵¹ Jaworski exemplifies this characteristic of expressionism by referring to ‘rats in Trakl’ (1992:37). Most probably he has in mind a short poem written by the Austrian poet Georg Trakl (1887-1914; he died in a military hospital in Cracow), *Die Ratten* ‘The Rats’. Professor Manfred Misch directed me to another Austrian Expressionist, Gottfried Benn, whose poem *Schöne Jugend* ‘Beautiful Youth’ exploits the image of rats with even greater effect. The poem, which appeared in 1912 in a collection *Morgue and andere Gedichte* ‘A Morgue and Other Poems’ (Dierick 1992:4), speaks of a drowned girl and the rats which are found in her breast cavity. While Trakl uses the image of rats to merely evoke disgust, Benn’s poem shocks and horrifies. The grotesque in Trakl is timid, it materialises by the infusing an idyllic landscape (‘In the courtyard the autumn moon shines white’ with morbid images of rats leaping from everywhere and scrambling ‘greedily, insanely’ flooding ‘house and sheds’ (1968:23). The grotesque character of Benn’s poem is aggressive, its tone is morbid, the imagery obscene. Benn mocks a folk song of the same title, for his ‘schöne Jugend’ is a literary cliché which destroys the expectations of the readers, as pointed out by Dierick. Benn’s attack is, in his view, ‘directed at the bourgeois overestimation of the beautiful’ (1992:4). Jasieński’s poem – intentionally or not – has the same title as Benn’s ‘Morgue’ cycle, but its tone is less taunting. His grotesque is similar to Benn’s, but he refrains from ‘the grotesque glee’ and replaces it with the uncertainty as to what role the rats will eventually play.

⁵² In his article “‘Ribbon of dreams’ is 100 years old” Barry Ronge writes: ‘With hindsight we can see that it was a truly momentous event, the birth of the only art form that can truly be called modern. Fine art, drama, literature, music – all the other arts had existed for centuries in one form or another.’ (*Star*, 28 December 1995:11) The fascination with this new form of art is documented by all sorts of artists, either through writing about it (for example the poem *Kinematograph* by Jakob van Hoddis (in S. Vietta (ed.), *Lyrik des Expressionismus*. Tübingen, 1985:58), or using a ‘kind of a camera technique, narrowing focus’ to show certain aspects of life (compare Dierick 1992:5 when he comments on Benn’s poem *Kleine Aster* ‘Small Aster’).

the invention of the apparatus that could capture and reproduce not only images but also actions must have altered the perception of people a century ago. The camera seems to transcend death, because it can revive those who are no longer with us. The phenomenon is in itself grotesque because although we see and even touch the images on the screen moving and speaking, they remain beyond an invisible barrier and they are *unreal*.

Jasieński was chiefly interested in the potential of the camera as a new technique for grasping the world, and probing its potential for the truthful portrayal of this world.⁵³ He noted that it permits an artist-reporter of events to retain his anonymity and to withdraw emotionally from the world portrayed. A camera can only speak through its images, and although through its selective focus it can lead towards a certain distorted⁵⁴ vision of the world, in the end the response and the final interpretation of the picture – as with the grotesque – is left to the audience. The ‘narrative technique’ of a camera, if one may use such term, is less obtrusive than that of a conventional narrative text. Jasieński leads the reader towards an understanding of his narrative technique by reaching for a specific jargon, for example the word supernumerary, or cinematograph, or assuming a specific style in the presentation of events-scenes. To illustrate this we may examine a poem in the collection *Shoe in the Buttonhole*, whose title *Przejechali* (‘Ran him Over’) has the subtitle: ‘Cinematograph’.⁵⁵ The poem is a ‘screenplay’ for a brief episode captured on a street. It includes a description of the physical appearance of the protagonists (‘a servant

⁵³ We find a corresponding opinion in Barry Ronge’s article: ‘[initially] no one seemed to know what to do with this invention. They were all concerned with scientific advancement and the use of film for research and accurate observation’ (*Star* 28 December 1995:11).

⁵⁴ As rightly pointed out to me by professor Joseph Sherman, ‘we know only too well that the camera *can* and *does* lie – it does not tell the truth – it selects and interprets, even perverts’. And yet we remain under the forceful impression that what we see is real; photography *seems to be* the most realistic of all arts. Barry Ronge points out this inconsistency, inherent in the cinema by saying that ‘Film offers us an *altered reality* that has the ring of *absolute truth* [...]’ (*Star*, 28 December 1995:11, emphasis added).

⁵⁵ Balcerzan explains its literal meaning as *recording of a movement* and in its secondary meanings as *a projector* and *a cinema* (in Jasieński 1972:16). But Jasieński even here evades univocal interpretation by referring to the ‘cinematograph of wheel spokes’, illustrating at the same time how poetic imagery changes, adopting to times.

girl with freckles in a white polka-dot blouse', or 'an insignificant man in a brown coat'), the situation on the street prior to the accident ('Cars. Platforms. Coaches.' and 'Red tramway rolled out from alleys') and fragments of dialogue taking place ('— Will you come? ... — "No, I can't..."', and '— Wait... — "No, no, don't ask, for I might give in..."'), and even the sequence of events during the accident itself is vividly presented:

*Trrrrrach!!!
Stoppp!!
Hamulec!
Aaaaaaaa!!
Przejechali! Przejechali!! (1972:16-17)*

*Trrrrrach!!!
Stoppp!!
Brake!
Aaaaaaaa!!
They ran him over! They ran him over!!*

The screenplay instructions, encouraged by the desire of the avant-garde to free the word from grammar and syntax, use abbreviated, broken sentences. But the episode is fully comprehensible. The reader, imitating the eye of a camera, restructures the full picture.

For the grotesque character of Jasieński's writing as a whole and poetry in particular this type of narrative technique is important because it allows the poet to withhold the intrusion of the lyrical 'I', and to remain emotionally distant from the events related in the poem. Especially interesting in this regard is the long poem *The City*. Consisting of a number of small episodes, this poem captures the character of the night-life in a metropolis, relying on the narrator adopting a role similar to that of a movie camera.⁵⁶ As a leitmotif in the poem there appears a 'policeman-supernumerary'. The use of the word

⁵⁶ This interpretation of a role of the narrator-poet is close to but not identical with '*kontakter*' (an intermediary), a 'station, transmitting between the world of nature and civilisation on the one side, and receivers on the other' (Balcerzan in Jasieński 1972:LVL). This is specifically the case in this poem, which 'speaks' to the reader through images, and to a lesser degree through its 'polyphony of dialogues and quotations' (Balcerzan in Jasieński 1972:LXVII), although, of course, the language of the poem is polyphonic, since polyphony is the only language known to a city.

'supernumerary', taken from cinematographic jargon, has specific significance: it emphasises the symbiosis of art with life, but even more importantly, it serves as a sharply ironic allusion to the ineffectiveness of structures destined to safeguard the well-being of citizens. The constable appears in various corners of the city, but has no influence whatsoever over the events, nor does he want to get involved. His only concern is the rainy weather which makes his routine night-shift miserable; he does not venture further than the street-corner and sees and hears 'nothing' (62, 63, 70). Exploiting the double meaning of the word 'supernumerary', the poet allows this figure to be no more than a part of the metropolitan landscape, with no impact on the lives of the people he is meant to protect. Thus the implied eye of the camera slides over his figure looking for other attractions. Finding one, it stops and intensifies its focus, blowing up the image or the scene to unlikely proportions, as illustrated in the example below, where the 'camera' focuses first on a building, then captures a window, and finally, peeps in to expose the action inside the building. After satisfying its curiosity it returns to the constable to resume where it left off:

*Chodzi, chodzi na rogu posterunkowy,
Co się zatrzyma – nasłuchiwa...
Nic.
Okna zapuściły story.
Tam w hotelu,
Światło całą noc się pali.
Ktoś chory.
Po doktora posłali.
Przez okno widać czasem wysmukłą szatynkę
Ciemny, głuchy cały parter...
Na trzecim piętrze świąteczko. –
Starszy pan zwabił do siebie 7-ioletnią dziewczynkę
I gwałci ją na fotelu.
Dziecko ma oczy szeroko rozwarte...

Na rogu posterunkowy chodzi
Tam i na powrót. Tam i na powrót.
I patrzy w czarne okna. (1972.70-71)*

The constable walks up and down,
Every time he stops – he listens...
Nothing.
Windows let their curtains down.

There, in the hotel,
 Light shines the whole night through.
 Someone is ill.
 They have sent for a doctor.
 In a window sometimes a slender auburn-haired women appears.
 The whole ground floor is dark, mute...
 There is a tiny light on the third floor. –
 An elderly man lured a 7-years old girl
 And rapes her in an armchair.
 The child's eyes are wide open...

The constable is walking on the corner
 Forth and back. Forth and back
 And looks into black windows.

The disturbingly grotesque effect is achieved when the content clashes with the dispassionate mode of presentation, illustrated again in the following example:

[...] *Nic! nic.*
Maleńki incydent...
Z pokojów wychylają się goście przygodni.
Przysłuchują się...
Skandal poczuli.
Na korytarzu stoi lysy staruszek
Bez spodni.
I krzyczy.
Dziewczyna rozzochrana, w koszuli,
Wtuliła się w kąt za schody –
Jęczy:
 – *Nie mogę już..*
 – *On mnie zamęczył... –*
Staruszek zaspany
Mruga w świetle oczkami szklistymi od sadła
I krzyczy w kółko:
 – *Trzymajcie ją! Trzymajcie! ...*
 – *Ona mnie okradła! ... – (1972:65-66)*

[...] Nothing, nothing.
 A minor incident...
 Casual guests appear from their rooms.
 They listen...
 Sensed a scandal.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ The poet switches from the present tense to the past tense for a reason. While the present tense reports on the events, the past tense is an intrusion, it introduces in passing his 'authorial'

In the corridor a bald old man is standing
 Without his pants.
 And yells.
 A dishevelled girl, in her underwear
 Nestled herself behind the stairs –
 And moans:
 – I can no longer...
 – He finished me off... –
 Heavy with sleep, the old man
 Blinks in the light his tiny eyes greasy with fat
 And shouts again and again:
 – Hold her! Hold! ...
 – She stole my money! ... –

The narrator in the quoted episodes refuses to share our disgust and contempt for the perpetrators, in both cases elderly men, or to share our sympathy for the victims, by completely withdrawing his presence and hiding behind an implied lens. The whole burden of the horror generated by the described events is shifted on to us, the readers, while the narrator remains unmoved and unfeeling as the cold lens of a camera. Nevertheless, the statement is made, and we detect in the poem a strong protest against the hypocrisy of conventional morality which have made old men into symbols of respect and moral values.

The grotesque discord between the poem's detached mode of presentation and its disturbing content aims to move its readers, to alert them to problems that trouble modern society. The episodes presented show that the city deprives people by denying them identity. The social sanction against being recognised in the act of wrong doing is not there because not only the victims but also the perpetrators remain unidentified. Calamity is noted by snooping but indifferent strangers, passers-by, or casual hotel guests. The tragedy of the victims remains known solely to them, while chance witnesses only feed their sick curiosity.

Jasieński frequently achieves the desired effect of surprise and even shock by exploiting the confusion of appearances typical of the grotesque, suggesting that the pleasant façade might hide an ugly interior while an obscure exterior might occasionally disguise joy and

comment. Similar intrusions we saw earlier where they were placed in brackets.

happiness. Such was the case above where we saw old men engaged in despicably perverse acts. Other examples of this strategy can to be found in *The City*. For instance the idyllic description of a house is juxtaposed to its vulgar appropriation:

*Na rogu dom.
Jasno oświetlony.
Różowe firanki.
Ciepło. Przytulnie. –
Burdel.* (1972:64)

There is a house on the corner.
Brightly illuminated.
Pink curtains.
Warm. Cosy.
A whore house.

On the other side of the town a different picture – a glimpse of shy happiness – is noted unexpectedly by the putative camera amidst the general dilapidation:

*Zimny deszcz.
Sina rzeka.
Woda.
Jęczy. Bulgoce. Narzeka.
Zerwała śluzy.
Wzdyma się. Przybrała groźna.
Toczy z pluskiem czarne banki.
Po brzegach, bokiem,
Migają domy. Czarne. Pokrywione.
Gruzy.
Szczera zęby ślepych okien.
U Czarnej Mańki
Widno.
Zalatuje harmonia. Wesoło.* (1972:69)

Cold rain.
Dead-blue river.⁵⁸
Water.
Groans. Gurgles. Complains.
It broke sluices.
It bulges. Its threatening waters have risen.

⁵⁸ *siny* means 'blue' (from the cold); in Polish it often refers to a corpse.

It rolls with splashing black bubbles.
 On its banks, sideways,
 Houses flit by. Black. Deformed.
 Ruins.
 They grin the teeth of their black windows.
 At the Black Mary
 Bright.
 The accordion is heard. Jolly.

The sensational interest of a young man in the sleazy and morbid side of the urban underworld clearly dominates Jasieński's portrayal of the city. This preoccupation frequently converges on the fate of the fallen woman. In *The City* the poet shows the destructive influence of the city on peasant girls who come there in the hope of finding a job. Left alone, without the support of close family, anonymous in the equally nameless crowd, they eventually turn either to prostitution, or seek salvation from earthly troubles in suicide. The suicide motif is presented again with a camera-like emotional blindness. The eye of an implied camera scrutinises first the banks of the river, then it glances at the fish nets hanging on the oars of boats, slides further, focusing finally on a group of people; it even records shreds of conversation:

Kilkud ludzi. Z latarniami.
Policejant.
Pochyleni nad czymś czarnym, bezkształtnym.
Świecą
Co?...
Woda przyniosła.
Męcy...
Kobieta. Twarz nie rozpoznać.
Zzielenią. Cuchnąca. Tragiczna.
Brzuch wydobyty.
Ciężarna. W dziewiątym miesiącu.
Z ubrania fabryczna.
Odwrócili głowy chłopi,
Rybacy.
– Nowina!...
– Mało to się kurw topi... (1972:68-69)

A few people. With lanterns.
 A policeman.
 They lean over something black, shapeless.
 They light their way.

What?...
 The water brought it.
 Dregs ...⁵⁹
 A woman. You can't recognise her face.
 It is green already. Ill-smelling. Tragic.
 Her belly swollen.
 Pregnant. In the ninth month.
 [Judging] By her cloth, a factory worker.
 Folk turned their heads,
 Fisherman.
 – News!
 – So many whores drown themselves, don't they...

A morbidly grotesque picture is painted here, one depicting an irreconcilable synthesis of individual tragedy and the demeaning physicality of death, accompanied by decay and the total absence of empathy from the onlookers. The scene makes a mockery of motherhood which has turned instead into a macabre farce and a subject for gossip. Like an echo a few lines later the same tragedy is multiplied and made commonplace by rendering the realm of urban folklore. This time the story is told in the lively rhythm of a happy-go-lucky couplet, a form which bitterly mocks a folk song:

– *Poszła dzieucha do miasta.*
 – *Um-ta-ta. Um-ta-tà-ta-ta.*
 – *Powróciła brzuchata.*
 – *Um-ta. Um-ta. Um-ta-ta-ta.*
 – *Oj ty wodo, wodo czarna,*
 – *Śmiertelne kochanie.*
 – *Oj przytulisz ty mnie, wodo,*
 – *Na ostatnie spanie!*
 – *Um-ta. Um-ta. Um ta-ta- tå.*
 – *Na ostatnie spanie... (1972:70)*

– A girl went to the city.
 – Um-ta-ta. Um-ta-tà-ta-ta.
 – Came back with a belly.
 – Um-ta. Um-ta. Um-ta-ta-ta.
 – Oh, you water, black water,
 – My deadly loving.

⁵⁹ In the original the poet uses the word *męty* which means 'lecs', 'dregs' and 'scum' (of society). In the context both meanings apply: the ambiguity is probably intended, to emphasise how thin the line is between a human being and refuse.

- Oh you will hug me, water,
- To my final sleep!
- Um-ta. Um-ta. Um-ta-ta-tà.
- To my final sleep...

The stanza parodies a folk song which belittles the magnitude of death through linguistic manipulation. Parodying, or perhaps only paraphrasing a folk song, it shows that the folk consciousness shuts itself away from the tragedy by resorting to the mellow euphemism ‘final sleep’ instead of facing the problem, which would require naming things by their names.

A mixture of Jasieński’s own curiosity about, and sympathy for the plight of women selling their bodies matches the sudden change in tonality with which these cases are presented. A good example of this can be found again in *The City*. Thus, apart from the direct or indirect morbidity of passages already quoted, there are also sparks of innocent humour:

*Jak grywałem ja ci, Stasiu,
Griega, Musorgskiego,
Powiedziałaś mi ty, Stasiu,
– Nie klej naiwnego. –
Oj, Stasiu, Stasiu,
Nie klej naiwnego.*

*Jak czytałem ja ci, Stasiu,
Błoka z Tetmajerem,
Powiedziałaś – Kup mi lepiej
Kapelusz z rajerem. –
Oj, Stasiu, Stasiu,
Kapelusz z rajerem.*

*Jak uczyłem ja cię, Stasiu,
Składni, Geografię,⁶⁰
Powiedziałaś – Chciałbys darmo.
Każdy tak potrafi. –
Oj, Stasiu, Stasiu,
Każdy tak potrafi ... (1972:64-65)*

⁶⁰ Upper case in original, as Balcerzan observes, probably to retain in the stanzas a ‘graphic rhythm’: the second line in the first and second stanzas have two proper names. (in Jasieński 1972:65)

When I played for you, Stasia,⁶¹
 Mussorgsky and Grieg,⁶²
 You have told me, Stasia,
 – Do not play naïve. –
 Oy, Stasia, Stasia,
 Do not play naïve.

When I read for you, Stasia,
 Tetmajer⁶³ and Blok.
 You have told me: – Rather buy me
 A hat with a plume. –
 Oy, Stasia, Stasia,
 A hat with a plume.

When I was teaching you, Stasia,
 Syntax, Geography,
 You have told me: – You wish it cost you nothing.
 Everyone would do that.
 Oy, Stasia, Stasia,
 Everyone would do that ...

The above fragment, modelled on urban folklore, alludes to eternally penniless students who would like to get a girl without having to pay for her. Through the sudden change in the tonality, which considerably enhances the grotesque character of the poem, this fragment completes a picture of life which blurs together tragedy, bacchanalia, conviviality, farce and pathos.

Striking in this respect is the final part of the poem, featuring the moment when dawn breaks over the city and the night-shift ends for a prostitute whose apparent beatification is witnessed only by silence: the simple and human gesture of the Madonna grants her absolution, vindicating her sin and rising it to the level of suffering:

*A deszcz pada.
 Deszcz pada*

⁶¹ This is a diminutive form of the feminine name Stanisława (derived from Stanisław).

⁶² In the translation the order of the names, here and below, has been changed to retain the rhythm of the original.

⁶³ Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer (1865-1940), a Polish Modernist.

Drobniutki.
Aksamitny.
Błękitny.
Powietrzny.
Nad rynsztokiem siadły w szereg smutki.
Płaczą płacz swój odwieczny...
Ulicami chodzi cisza, chodzi.
W czarne okna przez szyby zagląda,
W czarne okna, zamknięte, jak groby.
Wspinają się na palców koniuszkach.
Twarz do szyb zapotniałych przyciska
I patrzy... –
Białe rozczochrane łóżko.
Rozrzucone części garderoby.
Pod łóżkiem nieodzowny zwykły sprzęt złowonny...
Na spoconym czole prostytutki
Spoczęły w ciszy ting-tanglu
Palace usta Madonny. (1972:72)

But rain falls.
 Rain falls.
 Tiny.
 Velvety.
 Azure.
 Airy.
 Over the sewage sorrows sit in a row.
 They commiserate their eternal grief...
 Silence strolls the streets, strolls.
 It peeps through glass panes into black windows.
 Into black windows, shut,⁶⁴ like graves.
 It leaps on its tiny tip-toes
 Pressing its face to sweaty windows
 And watches... –
 White dishevelled bed.
 Parts of clothing scattered in a mess.
 Under the bed an indispensable foul-smelling utensil...
 In the calmness of a second-rate night-club
 The burning lips of the Madonna rested
 On the sweating forehead of a prostitute.

The grotesque has more impact in this passage than anywhere else in the poem. Its presence is overpowering and detectable at all levels. The deeply lyrical tone of this passage stands strikingly out in the whole context of the poem, yet it also notes 'a foul-

⁶⁴ Jasieński frequently exploit the ambivalence of language, further expanding the scope of interpretation. Here he uses word *zamkniete* which means both 'shut' and 'secretive'.

smelling utensil under the bed'. Its sincere pathos, foreign to Futuristic poetics, is contaminated by the subject of the implied compassion, which in public opinion does not deserve the spiritual exhilaration granted here to women who live by selling their bodies. The melancholy of rain and sorrow is juxtaposed against the dramatic display of linen and clothing, indirectly referring to the activities that have just been taking place in the room. Windows, 'shut like graves', and the sweat on her forehead, speak more loudly than words about the silent torment of the prostitute. 'Sorrows' and 'silence' are violently displaced from their apparent metaphoric realm to the world of animated beings by the detailed descriptions of physical actions they perform: sorrows *sit in a row*, silence *strolls the streets* and *peeps through glass panes* (emphasis added). In the anonymous world of the nameless, tragedy is acknowledged only by itself.

But for Jasieński the city is not only a place of alienation. It also is a place where different people cohabit. Judging from the poem *The City*, whose character is specified by the poet as 'Synthesia',⁶⁵ the city is an agent bringing people together, synthetising their fate, though not in the administrative sense, but because of the corrupting influence it has on them. The agency through which the city lumps all its inhabitants in the same category is the sex act. The penultimate part of the poem serves that purpose. Its first two lines built an ominous atmosphere, resembling – but ultimately deriding – the Romantic style:⁶⁶

*Ciemno. Cicho. Czarno.
Nikt się nie ozwie, nie zbudzi.*

⁶⁵ Balcerzan explains that the subtitle refers to the 'synthesis of genres imitating forms of journalistic writing and other types of spoken language' (in Jasieński 1972:62), which is not entirely convincing. From the point of view of the profoundly grotesque character of this poem, it seems more meaningful to see in the subtitle a reference to the genre which would be capable of capturing the complex character of life in the city.

⁶⁶ Typical of this style is the use of the archaic *ozwie* as opposed to the modern *odezwie* 'no one is heard'. Compare with the opening lines, subsequently a refrain performed by the Chorus in Mickiewicz's Romantic drama *Dziady* ('Forefathers' Eve'): *Cicho wszędzie, głucho wszędzie. Co to będzie, co to będzie?* ('Silence everywhere, dead silence everywhere. What will happen now, what will happen?') (A. Mickiewicz, *Wybór pism*. Warszawa, 1951:244).

Pracuje, pracuje w nocy
MASTO – FABRYKA LUDZI. (1972:71)

Dark. Quiet. Black.
 No one is heard, no one awake.
 It works, it works at night
 THE CITY – FACTORY OF PEOPLE.

In contradiction to what has gone before, the third line makes the absolute silence problematic, while the last line comes as a complete surprise. Written in capitals, it stands out from the rest of the text, breaking not only its logical construction but also its visual harmony. But since harmony is of least concern to Jasieński, he proceeds to portray the functioning of this incongruous ‘factory’:

*Przewracają się w łóżkach podlotki.
 Straszno. Zaparło dech.
 Śni im się pierwszy, taki słodki,
 Taki bolesny grzech.
 Czernieją okna. Wszystko śpi.
 Szaaa!... Czyjeś kroki za Bramą...
 Po burdelach, hotelach, po chambre garnie
 Tysiącem tłoków w rytmie krwi
 Pracuje gigantyczne Dynamo.
 Na kilometry sienników rozparło się Miasto –
 Wielki parzący się kurnik. (1972:71)*

Teenage girls are turning in their beds.
 Horror. They cannot breathe.
 They⁶⁷ dream of the first, so sweet,
 So painful sin.
 Windows are black. Everything asleep.
 Shaaa!... Someone’s steps at the gate...
 In the bordellos, hotels, and *chambres garnies*⁶⁸
 Like thousands of pistons in the rhythm of blood
 Works this gigantic Dynamo.
 In kilometres of mattresses the City spread itself –
 A great copulating chicken-house.

⁶⁷ It seems that there is a minor error in the original text, where the pronoun appears as *mi*, meaning ‘I’, instead *im*, meaning ‘they’.

⁶⁸ French: a room rented for one night. In the original used in singular.

Subsequent lines, however, do not pursue the production theme implied by the word 'factory', but refocus instead on the consequence of indiscriminate sexual encounters – a venereal disease. Thus, when the night comes to its end, in doctors' rooms, in clinics and hospitals endless lines of patients await a verdict which is invariably the same – positive – regardless of whether it affects 'a black labourer or a white banker' it is inevitably 'a firm chancre'. This is how Jasieński sees the rôle of the city, which brings people together through sex and its undesirable consequences. Characteristic of this passage is its parody of pathos, sudden change of planes, boldness of imagery and terminology, frequently insulting the tastes of general public, qualities that place this fragment in close proximity to the poetics of Expressionism.

Jasieński's urban poetry uses the city landscape not as a decoration, nor a background against which the action develops. More often than not a city is presented as a body which by virtue of its character brings people together and presses them into the nameless crowd. The city dictates the lifestyle to its faceless and anonymous inhabitants, it alters their value system, it inverts the laws of nature. Life in the city as seen by the poet stands in contradiction to the deterministic, knowable world. To represent this life, Jasieński invariably reaches for the grotesque which allows him to expose this reality by 'distorting surfaces in order to depict the monstrous existence beneath them', to use Mc Elroy's phrase (1989:20].

The Social Interests of Bruno Jasieński

Enormous black mass, terrifying and magnificent, [...]
Oh Crowd! Oh Mob! Titan! Nation!
(Jasieński: *I Am Tired of Language*)

In his overview of avant-garde literary movements, Jaworski observes that, rethinking the role of art and its place in society, the Polish avant-garde had to take into account not only the new political independence of Poland itself but also its place in undergoing political change in Europe, including the upsurge of revolutionary sentiments. The Polish avant-

garde also had to specify its attitude towards civilisational transformations and to define its attitude to mass culture. But, as Jaworski notes, being primarily interested in finding new artistic forms, avant-garde artists were less eager to make their works available for promoting the agendas of political parties. In general, concentrating on the social and moral ideals of leftist ideologies, they seldom gave their involvement a concrete political form through, for instance, active participation in political movements or making their works a platform of direct political propaganda (Jaworski 1992:67). Jasieński's case was no different, and it is important to view his leftist interests in this context. In accordance with Futuristic programmes fortified by an anarchic tendency – typical of youth – to spurn any authority, Jasieński rejected almost everything in the world around him. Communism, on the other hand, appealed to him in the same way as it did to many other artists – as a movement which was believed to be bringing a new order and a better, more just society built on new moral codes, in which people would be judged by their deeds not by their possessions. Thus, while denying Jasieński's interest in leftist ideologies would be tantamount to misinterpreting his writing, the views of critics who see in his poems explicit 'ideology' (Carpenter 1983:40), Kolesnikoff 1982:58) need to be put in perspective.

Jasieński had a 'misty' perception of the nitty-gritty details of Communist ideology in the early years in his creative life.⁶⁹ Moreover, his political aspirations were met with distrust from left-wing political parties such as the Polish Socialist Party (PSP) and the Communist Party of Poland (CPP) which demanded propagandistic art, disregarding matters of artistic innovations and considering them mostly foreign and obscure (see in Jaworski 1995:144-

⁶⁹ Dziarnowska mentions that one of Jasieński's friends called him *salonowy komunista* 'a drawing-room Communist' (1982:142). Jasieński himself recalls his attraction to the proletariat as 'abstract' and admits that he believed the proletariat had the power to destroy bourgeois society. In 'The Last Testimony' he admits: 'To tell the truth, in my misty understanding of scientific socialism at the time, it was not entirely clear to me – and not that important either – what was the true driving force that could elevate the working class from the ruins of old system. The essence of the matter was in the destruction. [...] If I had to define the gist of my literary activity at that time, I would characterise it as a rebellion of a rabid petty-bourgeois suffocating in the cage of bourgeois Poland, and promoting the idea of destruction for the sake of destruction' (cited in Jaworski 1995:139-142).

145).⁷⁰ On the other hand, revolutionary images and rhetoric in Jasieński's poetry should not be taken as direct statements of his ideological commitment, but should be seen in the context of other artistic movements at that time. 'The brutal and consciously provocative anti-aestheticism of Jasieński's poetry', as Jaworski puts it (1992:67), is deeply rooted in the aesthetic programme of Futurism, while ideologically his poetry remains vague and indeterminate. As is repeatedly seen in both manifestos and poetry, Jasieński was foremost an artist, and the question of how to make art consonant with the time was his main concern. It has already been pointed out that he vehemently rejected reality with all its painful aspects. But the suffering, the poverty and the abuse prevailing in this world were portrayed as spontaneous – even if undesirable – factors of human existence, frequently presented as a result of individual perversion or the social pathology of big conglomerates. And while this attests to the poet's compassionate nature, it provides no evidence that Jasieński unequivocally directs blame at the existing social system. Indulging in desecration of everything that his society held sacred, the young poet's rebellion was total and anarchic.⁷¹ As Lubelski notes, such are 'the characteristics of a prophet, of someone who embodies values as yet not clearly grasped, although most certainly terribly important' (1973:65). The notion of anarchy enters the definition of Futuristic programmes from the very outset and can be clearly recognised in the tone of Jasieński's first poetic manifesto, where serious social concerns are immediately dismissed by the jocular tone of the following passages. In one instance he calls for a new house for the nation, and in another he shows 'the face of a jester, who glorifies uncontrollable freedom' (Lubelski 1973:63), as seen in the passage, quoted below:

⁷⁰ See Jasieński's own words: '[...] although the party demanded that I reject entirely what I regarded as literary work, I chose not to do so. [...] The example set by Romain Rolland, under whose influence I remained at that time, told me that without losing "creative freedom" I might still become the tribune of revolutionary message' (cited in Jaworski 1995:149).

⁷¹ These tendencies are noted among others by Kowalczykowa in *O pewnych paradoksach futurystycznego programu* 'About Certain Paradoxes in the Futuristic Programme' (1969) and Lubelski in *Anarchia i dyscyplina: O Polskich powieściach Brunona Jasieńskiego* 'Anarchy and Discipline: About Polish Novels by Bruno Jasieński' (1973).

Więcej słońca.

[...]

Odrzucamy parasole, kapelusze, meloniki, będącmy chodzić z odkrytą głową. Szyje gołe. Trzeba, aby każdy jak najbardziej się opalił. Domy budować należy ze ścianami szklanymi od południa. Więcej światła, powietrza i przestrzeni. Gdyby sejm obradował na powietrzu, na pewno mielibyśmy o wiele słoneczniejszą konstytucję [1972:202-203, bold in original)

More sun.

[...]

We reject umbrellas, hats, bowler-hats, we will walk with bare heads, with bare necks. It is necessary for everyone to get sun-tanned. Houses must be built with glass walls facing the south. More light, more air, more space. If the Polish Parliament were to hold its sessions in the fresh air, we certainly would get a much sunnier constitution.

This lack of consequence is not accidental either in the writings of Jasieński or in that of other Futurists, a point that has been widely noted by many scholars of avant-garde movements. Zaworska, among others, observes that Futurists, ‘extolling civilisation, at the same time expressed their fear of it; they appealed to the logic of scientific thinking and at the same time dreamt about the absolute freedom of a madman. [...] They applauded discipline and precision, but at the same time they stood for free choice and anarchy’ (1963:101). Stylistically, Jasieński’s sudden and frequent changes of tone stand for the grotesque indeterminacy, for the constant balancing on the ‘knife edge’ dividing serious from trivial and pathos from amusement. In the ideological sense, such grotesque ‘somersaults’ attest to an inability – or an unwillingness – to take a definite stand on the issues concerned. In the illustration cited above, genuine concern is immediately contradicted by an acrobatic mental leap, leaving the unsuspecting reader flabbergasted and without a satisfactory explanation about what the artist means by ‘the new home’.

The grotesque plays a crucial role in obscuring Jasieński’s commitment to the left. We intend to show that it is abundantly present in all his ‘ideological’ poems, such as *Piesń o głodzie* (‘A Song about Hunger’), *Marsylianka* (‘Marseillaise’), *Prolog do ‘Futbolu*

Wszystkich Świętych ('Prologue to the "Football of All the Saints"')⁷² and *Psalm Powojenny* ('The After-War Psalm').

Chronologically, the first poem to develop the theme of revolution is *A Song about Hunger* (1922). Later, in *By Way of Autobiography*, written in 1931 at the request of the Soviet authorities, Jasieński boasted that in post-war Polish literature it was 'the first serious poem extolling the social revolution, the dawn of which was burning in the East' (248). Even though the interpretation of the poem was bent considerably to suit the political climate of the Soviet Union at the time, the poet admitted certain 'ideological imprecisions', as he put it, blaming 'the remnants of petty bourgeois idealism, like shoes made without fitting that are too small' for preventing him 'from making a decisive step'. Although it is difficult to ascribe any definite meaning to his concept of 'petty bourgeois idealism', the fact remains that *A Song about Hunger* is rather ineffective in the ideological sense. Firstly, the creative process, explained in the poem, does not emphasise the conscious or deliberate effort of an artist to expose injustice and oppression. Secondly, the social protest is initiated by the individual, while the poet's ideological metamorphosis originating in the romantic tradition ('I call upon you, like gustaw')⁷³ is lacking convincing motivation. Thirdly, the events presented in the poem are as incongruous as is the poet's suggestion that the poem has been created by the city itself is logically inconceivable. The city is shifted to the category of living organisms and attributed with the ability to hear everything and write about everything 'in the shorthand of thousands of accidents'

⁷² Jasieński did not write the poem itself (Dziarnowska 1982:106).

⁷³ In accordance with Futuristic poetics Jasieński writes names in lower case. Here Gustaw is a main character in *Forefathers' Eve* by A. Mickiewicz, the principal Polish romantic poet. When Gustaw complains of his unhappy love, he is told by a priest: 'Man is not created for tears and laughter, but for the good of thy neighbours, people' (1951:258). In the course of the drama Gustaw is transformed from a man preoccupied with his unhappy love into a man dedicated to the cause of his nation and of humanity ('I and the fatherland are one. My name is Million – because I suffer for millions' (285). To mark this transformation he even changes his name to Konrad, which is the name given by Mickiewicz to a Lithuanian hero in his earlier work *Konrad Wallenrod*. Konrad is inspired by human suffering, which eventually turns into an open confrontation with God: *Kłamca, kto Ciebie nazywał miłością Ty jesteś tylko mądrością*. ('A man who called you love, lied. You are only wisdom' [284]). For a more detailed analysis of Mickiewicz's work see Miłosz (1983:222-223).

(1975:73). As the prologue to the poem emphatically states, the city writes the 'new poetry', the only true and effective poetry which is able to move and inspire modern man:

*o wszystkim pisze miasto w swoich 40-szpaltowych poematach:
 strajki w elektrowniach. przejechania. samobójstwa.
 oto jest prawdziwa gigantyczna poezja.
 jedyna. dwudziestoczterogodzinna. wiecznie nowa.
 która działa na mnie jak silny elektryczny prąd.
 jak śmieszne są wobec niej wszystkie poezje.
 poeci, jesteście niepotrzebni! (1972:74)*

about everything writes the city in its 40-column poems:
 strikes in power-stations. accidents. suicides.
 this is the true gigantic poetry.
 the only one. twenty-four-hourly. eternally new.
 it affects me like a strong electric current.
 how ludicrous are all poems when compared to this poetry.
 poets, you are not needed!

The image of the universe which the poem develops is a concoction of brutal reality, and delusion. Sometimes it is an unbearable hell on earth, at other times some exceedingly grim hallucinatory dream where the city is cross and cross is Christ (See Sterna-Wachowiak 1985:116:117).. The city cries with tears of tramways, while houses engage in a threatening dance:

*jeszcze i jeszcze,
 bezkształtne, wypukłe
 domy czarne, obłoszłe, karmione deszczem
 napęczniały jak gąbki,
 napuchły,
 rozlały się, rozpełzły rozdęte, stulice
 wystąpiły na chodniki z ciemności,
 zsunęły się,
 przecięły krzyczącą ulicę
 – ludzie!
 – pomóżcie!
 – rozgniotą!
 wypłynęły w uścisku skrwawione wnętrzności
 i bez jękiu wylądyły się w błoto.*

*a czarne ściany rosną
 ciągną się do góry.*

*zasłoniły całe niebo,
zakryły szczyty,
jakby ogromne ołowiane chmury
na ziemi urządziły meeting. (1972:79-80)*

again and again
shapeless, convex
black houses, slimy, fed with rain
bulging like sponges,
swelled,
spilled, crawled inflated, manyfaced
overflowed to pavements in the darkness,
they came together,
cut through the roaring street
– people!
– help!
– crushing me!
smashed bleeding entrails poured out
without a single groan into the mud.

and black walls rise,
extend upwards.
they covered the whole sky,
they covered summits,
as if huge lead clouds
made a meeting on earth.

This poem recalls the images of dilapidated houses and the phantasmagoric dance of lamps in the poem *The City* discussed earlier. The city itself has a hundred faces ('*stuulice*'⁷⁴); and one of them belongs to a city-victim (represented as Christ) and the other to an omnivorous, insatiable city monster-oppressor. The 'reality on the verge of hallucinations' validates the oppressive and threatening character of daily life in the city. However, images that could be explicitly inscribed into the ideological context of social or political tyranny are few in the poem. It is a 'a blind horse, overdriven to death' and some unknown people, who died of starvation, becoming 'the bizarre [*przedziwny*] fertilising sap' of humanity. Strong emphasis is laid on the concept of hunger, which in the poem is the sole factor dividing the society into the starving and the satiated, that is into the oppressed and the

⁷⁴ Jasieński's neologism *stuulice* means 'with hundreds of streets'; it has been created by analogy with *stulice* 'with hundreds of faces'.

oppressors. The starving masses are the zombie-like creatures watching the gargantuan feast of the rich through the window :

*chodźcie tu,
wołam was, jak gustaw,
których zapadłe w głąb policzki
pozwolą jasno mi policzyć,
ileście dni nie mieli w ustach.
czarni, brązowi, biali bracia!
zgrajo obdarta i wychudła!
gdy nocą księżyc wyjrzy z chmur,
jak szczury wyłączcie z nór.
pełzniecie,
wlokąc nóg swych szczudła,
pod okna, gdzie przy stołach żrà
za szybą natłoczonych barów
sterty kompotów i homarów
dranie spasione waszą krwią
i dziwnie oczy wasi się lśnią,
aż was nie spłoszy krzyk zegarów. (1972:98-99)*

come here,
i call, like gustav, upon those
whose deeply sunken cheeks
permit me to count
days when you had nothing in your mouth.
Black, brown, white brothers!
you, ragged and emaciated gang!
at night when the moon peeps from between the clouds,
you crawl out of your burrows like rats.
you creep,
dragging the clutches of your legs
to the windows, where at the table
behind the window-panes of crowded bars,
bastards batten on your blood
gorge themselves with piles of compotes and lobsters
and your eyes shine strangely
until you are frightened away by the scream of clocks.

The poet unites with the crowd of the hungry and changes the form of his address from 'I' ('I call upon you', 'I see you', 'oh, my brothers' [99]) to 'we' ('our green bellies', 'we suck our saliva', 'we dream of sweet *baumkuchen*,⁷⁵ 'we devour it violently, in chunks,

⁷⁵ Type of sweet cake, baked in layers, a 'pyramidal cake' usually prepared for Easter.

choking' [100-101]), implying that, as Balcerzan puts it, 'the hunger is what unites them' (1968:250). Speaking of hunger, however, Balcerzan neglects to note that the concept of hunger in the poem has a variety of meanings. It is associated not only with 'the rivers of starved people' who demand bread, but implies also those who merely crave power (98), and those that are hungry for blood, as in *A Song of Engine Drivers*, which constitutes an integral part of the poem (see below p. 154). In the semantic field of hunger one may also fit the appetite for life:

*życie cudownym sokiem trysnęło nam w oczy,
jak pod nożem dojrzały ananas! (1972:87)*

life squirted into our eyes its wonderful sap,
like the ripe pineapple under the knife!

There is also the unspecified 'hunger' which torments the poet. In order fully to understand the ambivalence of the concept of hunger in this poem it is necessary to decode the allusion to the personal despair. *A Song about Hunger* is dedicated to Jasieński's late sister Renia on the first anniversary of her death, 'instead of flowers', and is preceded with a motto from Apollinaire: *libres de tous liens, donnons-nous la main* 'free from all the fetters, we shall hold our hands' (75). The motto may be taken as a poetic paraphrase of the Communist slogan 'proletarians of all countries, unite', which in itself is the last sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is, however, conceivable to see in it an expression of the poet's longing for his dead sister.⁷⁶ The mention of fetters (moral? family relations? death-life situation?) and the holding of hands calls for an explanation, which the poem does not provide. The ambivalence as to whether the poet speaks of personal or of public affairs is maintained throughout the poem, as manifested by the multiplication of deliberately vague formulations. Part one, for instance, begins with this strange two-line address intentionally cut from the wider context:

⁷⁶ In the poem *Rain* Jasieński refers to her as 'a white lily' and Beatrice, implying that she might be his beloved, and in *Renia's Funeral* (with a dedication: 'To you, my Little One, anything good that I ever did or will write') he describes a funeral ceremony and wedding as identical. Balcerzan places this myth-making within the Futuristic tendency to mislead and misdirect the reader (in Jasieński 1972:X).

*daj twarz do kolan swych przytulić.
krew z twoich palców zliżem.* (1972:78)

Allow to nestle [a] face against your knees.
we will lick blood from your fingers.

Judging by the first line, it is a lyrical address to someone dear to the poet, but the second line dispels that impression, and by its aggressive imagery contradicts the lyrical atmosphere of the previous line. Licking someone's hand evokes the image of an affectionate dog and may imply ultimate devotion, but the licking of blood from someone's fingers might lead to the awkward conclusions that we are dealing with strange creatures. The archaic verb *zliżem* and its plural form implies solemn patriotic or religious songs.⁷⁷ The interpretation remains inconclusive, while the questions multiply. Who is the addressee of these lines? Who wants to nestle whose face? Who is 'we'? The grotesque indeterminacy leaves wide margins for speculation. The strategy of confusing the reader rather than leading towards an acceptable interpretation continues, the grotesque tension is not relieved in the following stanzas which describe the crucified city (quoted earlier, p. 117). The bloody fingers may thus be the fingers of this crucified city, and the knees may also be the knees of the city. Such direct reference to the city's body parts are only possible in the grotesque. The reasons for such strange transformation of the city is not given, although contemplated by the poet for a brief moment:

*nie będę żył jak kato, ni walczył jak samson.
głęb, który rośnie we mnie, ciska mną w gorączce.
był człowiek, który nie jadł, nazywał się hamsun
i zrobił na tym później sławę i pieniądze.* (1972:80)

i refuse to live like cato, and to struggle like samson.⁷⁸
the hunger that grows in me, throws me in fever.

⁷⁷ The archaic form of the first person plural of the verb *lizać* 'to lick' is used: *zliżem*, instead of the modern *zliżemy*. This form is used occasionally in patriotic songs elevating their character, for example in *Rota* 'The Oath': *Nie rzucim ziemi skąd nasz ród ...* (*rzucim* instead of *rzucimy*).

⁷⁸ Cato is known in ancient history for his stern sense of duty and rigid discipline, while the Bible (Judges 13-16) attributes to Samson great physical power and lust for women (Dě-lī-lăh). It is not quite clear which qualities of the ancient heroes Jasieński here renounces.

there was a man that did not eat, his name was hamsun,⁷⁹
which later gave him money and fame.

The stanza formulates what the poet *is not* going to be or do, a formulation that has decisively wider margins than if he had said directly what he *is* going to do. The hunger which ‘grows in him’ throws him into a nightmare, or some state of fantastic delusion, the boundaries of which are not delimited. Such a state obviously yields the prolific grotesque: day becomes a dog (‘day hauled, bristling its hair’) and night ‘sings bizarre songs’. The ceiling closes in on the poet lying on a shabby sofa, while ‘the plaster on the walls splits, as if the room smacked its lips’, making it obvious that not only does the poet experience his vague craving, but also that the whole world is animated by the desire to devour another being. The grotesque tension grows when the conditional mode of narration is replaced by the direct description of walls whose toothless gums start to masticate, the table suddenly starts to dance and the fireplace begins to jump like a puppet. The poet feels like a hounded dog and the only possible escape is through the window. He falls from the fifth floor,⁸⁰ landing on the ‘soft mattress of tarmac’ and begins his journey up and down like a ball. He finds himself in a state of weightlessness, and begs for help –

– *pomóżcie!*
– *pomóżcie!!*
– *pomóżcie!!!* (1972:83)

– *help!*
– *help!!*
– *help!!!*

– and for kindness:

⁷⁹ Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) published his famous novel *Hunger* in 1888 and was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1920. Jasieński’s ironic, even disdainful reference to Hamsun can only be interpreted as a juxtaposition to his own hunger.

⁸⁰ It is characteristic of Jasieński’s grotesque that he deliberately makes constant reference to physical reality identifiable by numbers, names, and other useful data, amidst the most awkward and bizarre situations.

– nie bójcie się.
 – nie krzyczcie.
 – nic nie zwichnąłem.
 – przyciśnijcie mnie.
 – mocniej! (1972:83)

– don't be afraid.
 – don't shout.
 – i didn't sprain anything.
 – hug me.
 – stronger!

When he is finally secure in an ambulance, long green palm-trees toss to and fro in his skull. He again addresses his dead sister, this time with words which resemble a direct sexual innuendo.

*Reniu!
 to ty?
 jak dobrze że przyszłaś
 aksamitnymi rękami po twarzy mnie głaszczesz.*

*pamiętasz wtedy wieczór...
 deszcz za oknem śpiewał
 słuchałem, czy choć jeden nerw Twój jeszcze drży mną
 na zielonym cmentarzu teraz skomla drzewa
 i jest tak bezlitośnie, przejmując zimno. (1972:83-84)*

Renia!
 is it you?
 how good of you to come.
 you caress my face with your velvety hands.

do you remember that evening...
 rain⁸¹ was singing outside the window.
 i listened, if at least one of Your⁸² nerves vibrates with me.

⁸¹ This is possibly an allusion to an evening, described in the poem entitled *Rain*, also dedicated to Renia. The rain sets the climate for the mysterious ceremony described in the poem, where 'white Pierrot, a night poet' reads his poems to the white lily. Later the Pierrot becomes 'the grotesque puppet, poor clown, foolish knight of Beatrice'. The poem more than likely relates a particular personal episode in the relationship between the brother and the sister.

⁸² In accord with the original, the capital letter in the pronoun 'your' is retained here and in the next quotation.

on the green cemetery the trees now whimper
and it is so mercilessly, bitingly cold.

The following two stanzas, conspicuously lyrical and conventional in character, speak of the poet's loneliness and sadness:

*chłipiący skowyty z krtani na wierzch się wyspinał.
czepia się Twojej sukni, pełnie ku dloniom.
uciekać nie mam siły.
nadchodzi finał.
zajadli mali ludzie z psami mnie gonią.* (1972:84)

a whimpering squeal from the throat climbed to the surface.
it clings to Your dress, creeps to the palms of Your hands.
i have no strength to run away.
the end is coming.
small bigoted people chase after me with dogs.

The crowd which pursues the poet, and eventually kills him, picks up his corpse and carries it above their heads like a banner. The persuasiveness of this bizarre metamorphosis of the individual into a symbol of the victory of the masses is undermined by the vagueness of the reasons given for his trauma. The poet, as if aware of this deficiency, performs another 'somersault' and changes the tone from the emphatically solemn ('bells were *belling* [neologism meaning to *peal*] in the bells and in bells their scream died') to the openly burlesque:

*gdy nagle
straszny,
obandażowany
człowiek
podniosłem się ogromny,
groźny,
jak wykrzyknik!

panowie!
jestem wzruszony.
widzicie, zbladłem.
żegnacie mnie tak pięknie i tyle tu kobiet,
ale zapominacie, że nic dzisiaj jadłem
i muszę zaraz iść na obiad.* (1972:86)

while suddenly
 horrific,
 bandaged
 man
 i have risen huge,
 terrifying,
 like an exclamation sign!
 gentlemen!
 i am moved.
 you see, i paled.
 you bid farewell so beautifully to me; and so many women are here,
 but you forget that I have eaten nothing today
 and must now go to dinner.

The last fragment dispels any doubt: starvation – the physical hunger – is not a threat to the poet. The character of the hunger which ‘grows’ in the poet and ‘throws’ him in fever (see earlier quotation, p. 147) remains undetermined.⁸³ Equally enigmatic remains the connection between the poet’s sister and the cause of the starving masses. It would be inappropriate at this stage to make allegations regarding the character of the poet’s affection for his late sister, and Balcerzan may be quite right that she became part of Jasieński’s Futuristic myth-building endeavours (in Jasieński 1972:X-XI). Nevertheless, the point needs to be made that her presence in the poem, the revolutionary character of which has been pointed out by Jasieński himself and the critics, is grotesquely uncomfortable.⁸⁴

⁸³ A different opinion is expressed by Kolesnikoff, who, comparing Jasieński’s poem to Mayakovsky’s *Облако в штанах* ‘A Cloud in Trousers’, writes that the cause of Mayakovsky’s hero’s suffering was unhappy love. She argues that Jasieński ‘provides a totally different motivation for his hero’s tragedy’. In her view the protagonist’s hallucinations result not from unrequited love, but from starvation. Being consumed by a hunger fever, he enters into ‘conflict with the rest of the world.’ Kolesnikoff is emphatic that ‘the erotic theme does not appear in Jasieński at all’ (1982:54-55).

⁸⁴ Admittedly, the speculations are somewhat out of place here and yet they are encouraged by the frequent remarks made about Jasieński’s ‘peculiar’ personality. Apart from these considerations, they might be noted here as an additional feature of the writer of the grotesque. In a fragment of personal recollections by Jasieński’s close friend, quoted by Stern, the poet is remembered as a man ‘always reserved, embarrassed whenever the conversation touched his private affairs. He frequently could not conceal his acute sensitivity, some kind of inner embitterment and neurasthenic disposition towards a sudden change from a restless boredom to the explosion of cold irritation’ (1969:67-68). The French writer and journalist Stefan Priacel remembers Jasieński as ‘a bit dejected and secretive’, explaining it as a consequence of ‘*la détresse psychique et morale*’ (moral and psychological despair) (in Stern 1969:76).

In the grotesque, ‘hunger’ is always an ambivalent notion; it may refer to different categories, including craving for food and sexual desire but also thirst for power. Jasieński was aware of this correspondence, frequently linking sensations experienced during physical hunger to those characterising intense sexual appetite – both being the function of the body. In *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* we read: ‘He took her greedily as people take bread during the famine’ (1966:34), in *I Burn Paris* the whole action of the novel is justified by the hero’s ambivalent hunger. He is starving because he has lost his job and is suffering emotional anguish after his girlfriend abandoned him. In *The Lay of Jakub Szela* hunger and sexual desire are side by side in the same context:

*A musiałażeś ty, Maryś,
jakiś zadać czar mi,
że się niczym już jak tobą
gód mój nie nakarmi* (1972:108)

You probably, Maryś, had
thrown some spell over me,
that my hunger will not be fed
with nothing, but you.

Szela’s desire – ‘thicker than raspberry juice and sweeter than honey’ – is contextualised by the culinary imagery. The hero associates his love for Maryś with ‘thick broth’ and asks his young bride to taste it and to drink some of it. For Szela this bizarre food eventually proves perilous and he admits that he choked on it as on a treacherous fish-bone. Szela’s hunger for Maryś eventually becomes a symbol of the peasants ‘hunger’ to own the ground and his personal tragedy becomes his strength in defending the cause, which he eventually pursues. In this sense, *A Song about Hunger* can be seen as an earlier version of the metamorphosis of an individual into the hero representing the interests of the masses. Thus, the poet – the lyrical ‘I’ – eventually overcomes his ‘hunger’, by the intricate net of allusions associated with personal tragedy, and undergoes an incongruous metamorphosis from personal suffering, through what may be taken as an hallucinatory dream, to his death from the hands of the mob. The poet eventually becomes ‘resurrected’ but only to die again, this time offering his corpse as a ‘rag’ which the masses ‘may tear for a banner’ in their marching towards the ‘TOMORROW’:

*serce olbrzymie w krtani stanęło i skacze.
 wypłuje pod nogi, w piach wam.
 idziecie!
 krzyczeć nie mogę!
 ogromni w zorzy po żodze.
 trup mój
 krwawy,
 stratowany,
 czerwony,
 jak łachman,
 z którego może szmatę na swój sztandar udrą,
 w śmiertelnym zapatrzeniu leży wam na drodze,
 po której przechodzicie
 w JUTRO! (1972:88-89)*

the gigantic heart stopped in the larynx and jumps.
 i will spit it under your feet, on to the sand for you.
 you go!
 i can't shout!
 [you are] enormous in the fire of the morning light.
 my corpse
 bloody,
 flattened,
 red,
 like a rug,
 from which they tear a piece for their banner,
 lies in its deadly stare on the way,
 on which you will march
 towards TOMORROW

The grotesque character of this passage, and of the stages of this bizarre metamorphosis, stem from treatment of the human body which defies all laws of nature. Resisting the laws of gravitation the poet's body jumps up and down like a rubber ball; withstanding time, it lives again through past experiences; disregarding death, it returns to life but in the form of a red banner. The intonation never settles at a specific emotional tonality but teases the reader with an unsettled character: it plunges from solemn ('closer and closer came the walls. one cannot push aside crawling wall-papers') to clownish, (*a ku ku!* 'a fig for you'); from pathetic ('with my hands apart I fly up to the ceiling and again I fall to the ground') to prosaic ('don't shout, i broke nothing'). The reader's reaction remains thus unresolved, for the account of the stages through which the poet goes is as humorous as it is disturbing.

The grotesque affects the character of the poem on many levels, but the most unsettling grotesque imagery is associated with revolution, presented not as a social protest, but as any unrestrained carnivalesque revolt turning the world into a bloody festival of death, a revenge directed not only against the well fed, but also against nature, God and the world at large:

świat postawiony pod ścianę, jak mały, blady człowiek, mrugał bezradnie oczkami, gdy kolbasy wznieśli do ramion. płakał zmartwiony chrystus o dusze swoich owieczek, gdy salwą gruchnęły lufy i śnieg się krwią poplamił, nam-li dziś skomleć nad trupem, gdy hymnem tętni nerw, czaszką o ziemię grzmocic i krzyczeć: nie przeklinaj?! (1972:96-97)

the world put against the wall, like a pale little man,
helplessly blinked its eyes, when we raised rifles to our shoulders.
christ cried worrying about the souls of its flock,
when barrels discharged a volley and snow was stained with blood.
must we wail over its corpse today, when the nerve pounds with praise,
and to bang its skull on the ground and to shout: don't curse?!

The above fragment is taken from *A Song of Engine Drivers*. The narrative voice is the plural 'we'. This protest-song is as overladen with revolutionary rhetoric as it is with coarse imagery and language⁸⁵ but the emerging vision of revolution is not enticing. The poet does not focus on the positive change which revolution might bring, but rather on its power of destruction, emerging from the morbidly grotesque images employed. Thus, rebelling workers drag the sun to the ground and cut its throat with a knife, and a mob throws itself over the corpse to drink its gushing blood. As presented in the poem *I Am Tired of Language*, the fires of revolution were capable of consuming libraries and universities, in *A Song about Hunger* equally off-putting are the frightening descriptions of 'strange days, full of crimson terror', a true *carnival* of death and blood – the phenomenon overridden with contradiction and incongruity as its verbal formulation indicates. The world is 'a heavily armed war-ship, consumed by inferno', the earth is a

⁸⁵ In Polish, different words are used to distinguish the body parts of humans from those of animals. Jasieński uses words *leb* 'head', *słedia* 'eyes', *mordy* 'muzzles', which in Polish are normally used in reference to animals and are considered vulgar in reference to humans.

'huge propeller, swung *to the left* by black little people' (emphasis added). But contrary to expectations, the category of oppressors is esoteric; it consists of God ('party-less god cried over us with rain'), time ('the wheel of time squashed us'), nature ('starless nights witness sailors' skin being cut out of the flesh', 'red tongues of northern lights licked our faces to blood') and the sun: ('old and bald like Bismarck's head, shined into our eyes, into our muzzles'⁸⁶). The poet, who according to Futuristic programmes wanted to 'blow the minds' of his readers, here reaches for strong grotesque visions. The violent tone, the images relating to scenes of murder and contempt for life in general, have a dominating impact in this fragment. In the image of revolution painted by the poet there is nothing alluring that the political propaganda could use. On the contrary, we detect here an almost misanthropic ill-disposition towards people and a disregard for life in general. Even when the revolution breaks, 'the world like a pale little man' blinks its eyes in fear and 'the great bright NEWS' comes accompanied by blood, bullets and corpses.

Of all Jasieński's works, *A Song about Hunger* is the poem that is the most complex and difficult to interpret. Not much help is to be found in the various attempts made at interpreting it in the context of Vladimir Mayakovsky's acknowledged 1915 masterpiece *A Cloud in Trousers*. Balcerzan, who remains to date the most significant scholar of Jasieński's poetry, maintains that *A Song about Hunger* is a latent translation of Mayakovsky's poem (1968:254), a view also adopted by Kolesnikoff, who includes an attempt to introduce a scale of artistic merit into her comparison of Jasieński's poem with that of Mayakovsky: 'As Edward Balcerzan has pointed out, [Jasieński's] poem in a way 'corrects' the ideological shortcomings of *A Cloud in Trousers*, but artistically it does not match the original' (1982:58). However, Anatol Stern emphatically disagrees with this theory, maintaining that Jasieński's poem is 'a riposte' and that the similarities between the poems are 'strictly formal' (1969:34). Stern's view, although less sensational, seems to be more in line with the actual character of *A Song about Hunger*, which should be seen as an original creation, although it reiterates the fundamental burden of *A Cloud in*

⁸⁶ Balcerzan notes that in the reprint of the poem, published in *Earth to the Left* this metaphor becomes: 'sun bald fiery gendarme' (in Jasieński 1972:96). We can see that the intensity of the feeling of oppression increases.

Trousers: away with your love, away with your religion, away with your system, and in that order. These three 'aways' emphasise not only the profoundly romantic path from individual to general, but also reiterate the anarchic character of Futuristic rebellion against everything associated with the old. On the other hand, no other poet influenced Jasieński as much as Mayakovsky did. This influence, however, must be seen as affinity not as imitation.

In 1924 a group of Futurists published a collection of their poetry *Earth to the Left*, in which Jasieński featured prominently. Apart from republishing *A Song about Hunger*, Jasieński included a number of poems which maintain the tone of rebellion. In *Prologue to the 'Football of the All-Saints'* he continues his sacrilegious defamation of God, the oppressor and the actual debtor of people. The world is rendered grotesque through unusual metaphors and unexpected comparisons, while the unconventional linear organisation of the stanzas perpetuates the chaos reigning in the world:

*domy skaczą w konwulsjach sklepień
krew bulgoce ustami rynien
ręce moje wyciągam ślepe:
oddaj oddaj cóżeś nam winien!*

*gwiazdy z nieba lecą jak wiśnie
ostre dreszcze wstrząsają światem
znowu przyjdzie zgwałci i ciśnie
noc-megiera w kolczykach światel* (1972:32)

houses jump in convulsions of vaults
blood gurgles through the mouth of gutters
I extend my blind hands:
give give back what you owe us!⁸⁷

stars fall from the sky like cherries
sharp shivers shake the world
again the night-shrew will come in the earrings of lights
to rape and to chuck away

⁸⁷ The poet applies here unusual punctuation marks, while commas and full stops are dropped, a colon, exclamation points and question marks are retained.

The poem addresses God directly and is best described in terms of a palimpsest 'written into' a prayer, the original content of which has been effaced to make room for blasphemous reproaches and incongruous demands, such as –

*daj nam także do dzbanka z mlekiem
z chmur łyżeczką zbierać kożuszki* (1972:33)

let us scoop from clouds the head [of cream] with a teaspoon
for a jug of milk

– and

*po alejach twojego raju
daj nam się przespacerować* (1972:33)

allow us to walk
on the alleys in your eden

In the name of the suffering masses, 'holy in their anger', the poet rejects God's sacrifice as a means of redemption. The stanzas imply that the real suffering is here on earth, and the real felony has been committed by God who appropriated people's reasons for being angry and made them his own:

*po cóż po cóż na krzyżu pościsz
łaski swojej skąpisz wybrancom?
dobrzy ludzie cisi i prości
dawny⁸⁸ świat ten zbowili tańcem*

*długo byłeś ze swoich sług rad
płacz nad nami świętymi w złości
o twe racje któreś nam ukradł,
z aniołami rzucamy kości!* (1972:34)

why why do you fast on the cross
keeping from the chosen your good graces?

⁸⁸ Quite possibly this line is affected by a misprint, that is, the adjective *dawny* (ancient, former, old) appears instead of the adverb *dawno* (long time ago). In the latter case the line should be translated as: 'redeemed this world with a dance long time ago'.

good people quiet and simple
redeemed this old world with dance

you were happy with your servants for a long time now
cry for us holy in our anger
for your rights that you stole from us
with angels we cast the dice!

The grotesque in this poem does not intensify its iconoclastic tone and character, but rather disarms it, preventing the poet from falling into the trap of pathos, despised by Futuristic poetics.⁸⁹ Pathos in the grotesque can only function as a parody of itself, which is the case in this poem. The minor ironic overtones and grotesque imagery familiarise God, bringing him down from the pedestal of the cross and equalising his suffering with that of the everyday life of the people:

*przyjm nas! przyjm nas! wszyscyśmy święci
dobrzy ludzie prości i cisi
po cóż twarz twa jak kula rtęci
słońcem czarnym nad nami wis?/
jakoż brama twoja zamknięta?
otwórz! otwórz słyszysz kołata!
przyszły lata naszego święta
wszystkich ludzi z całego świata. (1972:33)*

receive us! receive us! we are all saints
good people simple and quiet
why does your face like a ball of mercury
hang over us like a black sun?

how can it be that your gate remains closed?
open! open you hear I am rattling!
years for our holiday came
for all the people of the whole world.

Frequently in Jasieński's poetry the problem only drafted in one place is taken up and given fuller treatment elsewhere or, if the issue is especially important to the poet, the

⁸⁹ See Balcerzan: 'Pathetic style is tearing words from the concrete and taking them to the sphere of abstract. Pathos excludes the poetic joke, because the joke reveals the character of a linguistic sign. One can only play with a word understood as a material thing, while one cannot play with a pure sign [...] because in itself it is not comic' (in Jasieński 1972:L).

same theme is reworked in more than one version. Such is the case with *The After-War Psalm*, which has the same tone of iconoclastic rebellion that sounded in *Prologue to the 'Football of All-Saints'*, although the end of the war is celebrated in heaven as well as on Earth:

[...]
*niech tańczy ten kto dotąd drżał
na niebie dzisiaj wielki bal jest*

[...]
*pan bóg pojechał na wakacje
i święci w raju grają w football* (1972:29)

[...]
let dance all those who were trembling
there is a great ball in the sky today

[...]
god went away on vacation
and saints play football in the eden

The title of the poem implies a genre typical of religious worship, but it is misleading. Instead of the lyrical, laudatory and imploring character expected from a solemn religious song, the poem reads as an '*antipsalm*', as noted by Balcerzan (in Jasieński 1972:28-29). The universe that emerges from the poem is as incongruous as the war itself, as illustrated by the following quotation:

*z trotuarów jak z żywnej podlanej grzedy
podnosili się białe i fioletowe kwiatki
ludzie padając na twarz krzyczeli: nie będę!
i płakali nie wiadomo nad kim*

*na zielonych karuzelach bladzi policjanci
gonili złodziejów na drewnianych koniach* (1972:31)

from pavements as from a fertile watered flower-bed
white and mauve flowers were rising
falling on their faces people were shouting: i will not!
and were crying without knowing for whom

on the green roundabout pale policemen
were running after thieves on wooden horses

The grotesque exposes the absurdity, nonsense and horror of war but is equally effective in painting a utopian picture of the wonderful future. The poet, the lyrical 'I', appears as a replacement for Christ: 'I will lead you all in our red dance.' He announces that Christ has disappeared and will not come to forgive sins, but people must unite in their forgiveness:

*odpuszczamy swoje nieprawości!
całujmy usta jedni drugim! (1972:31)*

we forgive all the wrongdoings!
let's kiss the lips of one another!'

The poem ends in an unexpected twist towards some strange celebration of life and of the human body. The grotesque performance of policemen on wooden horses in pursuit of thieves is thus juxtaposed with the equally grotesque dance in front of the mirror when for the first time the poet notices that he has hands, as well as everybody else, and this observation leads him to the conclusion that there is equality among all people:

*patrzcie! patrzcie jaki dziwny cud
jaka ogromna szalona nowina
przed lustrem tańczę w tył i w przód
na prawo i na lewo się krępię
to jest naprawdę nagle pierwszy raz:
ja mam ręce! my wszyscy mamy ręce!
para cudownych kiszek u ramion nam dynda
możemy je zginać rozginać
podnosić opuszczać ile kto chce
powiedzcie! powiedzcie sami!
jaka wspaniała winda!
a ja mam także palce
którymi chwytam i jem
i nogi na których tańczę! (1972:32)*

look! look what a strange miracle
what huge crazy news
i dance back and forth in front of the mirror

i turn right and left
 this really happened suddenly for the first time:
 i have hands! we all have hands!
 a pair of marvellous [pieces of] guts dangle from our shoulders
 we can bend and unbend them
 lift and bring down as much as one wants
 say! say yourself!
 what a wonderful elevator!
 and i also have fingers
 with which i grasp and eat
 and legs on which i dance!

Although the foreboding atmosphere of the grotesque apocalypse no longer affects this part, the grotesquely bizarre prevails in the way the poet describes the body. Arms are pieces of guts and they function like small lifts. It is the reversed picture of the body torn apart by bullets and the poet emphatically states 'we shall no longer tear hands and legs'. The Utopian vision of the post-war world is built on the image of Eden where angels will come to wash people's feet. Everything happens, not because of the conscious political action, but because of strange miracles.

The social revolution materialised for many Polish avant-garde poets as a revolution in art; few however reached a degree of radicalism that could be compared with the poetry of Bruno Jasieński, as Stern has noted. Very few poets in the inter-war period, he writes, spoke in such a rebellious and uncompromising way against the poetics they had found already in place, as Jasieński did 'in his striving to create the new world of images and concepts for the new people' (1969:92). The grotesque in Jasieński's poetry is consistently consonant with the prevailing perception of the world and the artistic programmes of the avant-garde at that time. It had its source in Jasieński's realisation that the world had undergone a dramatic change, the significance of which had not yet been fully grasped by the public. As an artist he felt obliged to awaken the public to aspects of contemporaneity and to expose the unpredictable nature of life.

The Grotesque Nature of the Dance-rebellion in 'The Lay of Jakub Szela'

The longest of Jasieński's poems, *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* ('The Lay of Jakub Szela'),⁹⁰ was written while the poet was living in France. In contrast to his earlier poetry, dominated as it is by urban scenery and Futuristic poetics, *The Lay of Jakub Szela* is a narrative poem based on an historical event, the peasant 'revolt' of 1846.⁹¹ Its poetics is drawn from the folk cultural tradition. However, a bold avant-garde influence is evident both in Jasieński's treatment of the historical data and in his attitude to the folk canon. To analyse the use of the grotesque in all its complexity in this poem is a task for another study. Here my intention is simply to illustrate that springing from the poet's views on life and art, this poem demonstrates that Jasieński consistently and deliberately reached for the grotesque as his own most characteristic means of expression.

As attested by Brucz,⁹² Jasieński's close Parisian associate, *The Lay of Jakub Szela* results as much from the poet's 'ideological motivations' as it does from his 'formal passions' (in Stern 1968:69). This seems to offer the most accurate and concise characterisation of Jasieński's poem, provided that the term 'ideological' is understood in the general sense that Brucz, himself an avant-garde artist, must have understood it – not as a specific political theory but as an individual artist's view of the world or the system of his personal beliefs. Jasieński's 'ideological motivations' have already been outlined in his first

⁹⁰ Originally published in Paris in 1926. Republished in Poland in a book version by Czytelnik in 1956. All references in this section are to the later edition, in the collection *Utwory poetyckie. Manifesty. Szkice* (1972).

⁹¹ As noted in the *History of Poland*, 'Within a few days [of February 1846] the peasant movement resulted in the ransacking of some 400 manors and about a thousand casualties. Labour services virtually ceased to be performed throughout central Galicia and soon the resistance movement spread to the rest of the province. The peasants, moreover, found a leader, a villager from Smarzowa, by the name of Jakub Szela, who presided over the lynching of his masters, the Bogusz family, then surrounded himself with armed bodyguards. He secured the obedience of the peasants within an area of several square kilometres and negotiated with the Austrian authorities' (A. Gieysztor et al. Warszawa, 1972:411).

⁹² Stanisław Brucz, a Polish avant-garde poet. During the nineteen twenties he lived in Paris and was a frequent guest of Jasieński's. Fragments of his recollections are reprinted by Stern (1969:67-70).

manifesto *To the Polish Nation...* (1921), in which he wrote that the time had come to 're-evaluate all the justice and injustice of the past millennium'. The tone of the manifesto proves that Jasieński was aware of the trauma the Polish peasantry suffered because its emancipation was neglected and subordinated to the pan-national effort of regaining Polish sovereignty. Jasieński felt that with the end of partition, 'a new house for the extended Polish nation' had to be built, while participation in this 'new house' must be established according to only one criterion – 'hard, iron, organic work' (1972:201).

Taking as a theme for his poem one of the most painful events in Polish history with the intention of showing it anew, Jasieński had to substantiate his approach which he did by writing a brief foreword.⁹³ From this foreword we learn that in the background of Jasieński's understanding of history is a view that history is subordinated to interpretation as much as everything else in life – 'the pedestals erected by national *historiosophy* [philosophy of history] are falling down and in their place new ones are being erected' (1972:241). With this commitment, Jasieński set himself the task of rearranging the hierarchy of Polish national heroes in order to present it from the point of view of the peasants as a social class. He was especially interested in one hero, Jakub Szela, officially regarded as a traitor to the national interest when he became the leader of the bloody mutiny of peasants in Galicia. The mutiny took place in the early spring of 1846 and was directed against the Polish gentry, seen by the official history as 'the only class in Polish society whose national conscience was fully awake' (Reddaway 1941:339).⁹⁴ As Jasieński notes in the foreword to the poem, the official history portrayed Szela as a pawn whose authority among the peasants was used by the Austrians to neutralise the gentry who at the time were fomenting an insurrection against the Austrian Kaiser.⁹⁵ Szela was rewarded for his help in pacifying the gentry and spent the rest of his life living comfortably in a

⁹³ Jasieński's polemic with the literary works referring to the same historical event is discussed in Rawiński (1969).

⁹⁴ F. W. Reddaway (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Poland*. Cambridge, 1941.

⁹⁵ See Reddaway 1941:339-342, 352-358; Gieysztor et al. 1972:409-413.

small estate granted to him by the Austrian Kaiser. Summarising the method used by the official history in creating such an image of Szela, Jasieński writes:

Historia oficjalna, grupując w sposób odpowiadający jej koncepcji narodowej pewne fakty dotyczące Szeli i konsekwentnie przemilczając inne, ulepiła z tego materiału odrzującą postać chłopa-prowokatora, konfidenta rządu zaborczego, zdrajcy interesów narodowych, zawsze niewspółmiernych i częstokroć sprzecznych z interesem klas upośledzonych. (1972:242)

Selecting certain facts in respect of Szela to suit its own conceptualisation of national values and incessantly omitting other facts, the official history fashioned from this material the repulsive figure of the peasant-provocateur, the confidant of the oppressor and the traitor of the national interest, [while these national values were] always incommensurable and frequently contradictory with the interest of the unprivileged classes.

Jasieński expressly admits that he does not intend to contest this version of events, 'logical in its own sense', but, bearing in mind the class interest of the peasants, he intends to create a different image of Szela by 're-selecting these very same historical facts or by reaching for new facts which are omitted in the official version'.⁹⁶ To illustrate his method Jasieński focuses on the nature of the 'reward' Szela received for his service to the Austrians. For murdering the gentry the peasants were promised release from field service as well as ownership of the ground on which they were working. This did not happen; when the rebellion ended after a few days, the peasants were ordered to return to the fields. Szela was arrested and subsequently sent to the distant province of Bukowina. He was given a piece of ground and spent the rest of his life there. The official history calls Szela's arrest 'a comedy' played by the Austrians to lull suspicion of Szela's collaboration while his 'exile' is presented as an opportunity to reward Szela with 'a small estate' for services to the Kaiser. Jasieński accepts Szela's arrest as real. Considering Szela's authority among the peasants and his rebellious nature, his banishment, in Jasieński's view, was to prevent further unrest, especially since Szela began to realise that he and all the peasants had in fact been duped (1972:243-245).

⁹⁶ *Nie myśląc wcale przeciwstawiać się tej, konsekwentnej w ramach swych zamierzeń, koncepcji negatywnej, usiłowałem stworzyć sobie inny obraz Szeli, drogą bądź grupowania tych samych faktów historycznych po linii interesu klasowego chłopstwa, bądź też drogą czerpania nowych faktów ze źródeł dotychczas przemilczanych* (Jasieński 1972:242).

Following his clearly outlined method, shifting the emphasis and reinterpreting certain source material, in addition to recapitulating the official version, Jasieński builds two more versions of his own. One version he outlines in the poem's introduction. This is the version of someone who identifies with the peasants as an historically oppressed class; it is a convincing reinterpretation of Szela's role in the mutiny. Basing his argument on historically verifiable documentation, Jasieński concludes that 'from the point of view of the peasants, Szela was not a traitor and he did not act with the intention of enriching himself, but was a conscious and selfless defender of the peasants deaf to the abstract reasoning of [those who stand for] national values' (ibid.:245). Yet another version of the rebellion and its leader is given in the poem, it is the version of an avant-garde artist. Jasieński juxtaposes three versions of the same event all referring to the same historical evidence but each time treated from a different point of view. The only objective criterion applied in creating each version is the law of the relativity of our perception of the world. Jasieński proves that any document is subject to individual interpretation which in turn proves that there is no such thing as 'the only truth'. The 'class consciousness' or artistic vision – applied separately or simultaneously, as is the case in *The Lay of Jakub Szela* – are factors that can alter the image of an individual or a deed as well as their ethical evaluation.⁹⁷

Jasieński's poetic version of the rebellion and its hero indicates the poet's move towards experimentation with longer epic forms and a clearly developed plot. Jasieński confronted the problem of devising a narrative technique that would distance him from the authorial 'I' so prominent in some of his earlier lyric poems, for example in *I Am Tired of Language*. The poet had already begun to develop such a narrative strategy in *A Song about Hunger*, in which he admits that 'poems are written by the city' (74), while in *The City* the presentation of events seem to owe their character to a camera-like vision. In *The Lay of Jakub Szela* the narrative method is explained in the prologue to the poem. It becomes a precalculated strategy and an open admission that the voice heard in the poem

⁹⁷ This notion of the impossibility to establish one objective truth appears with renewed intensity in Jasieński's last unfinished realistic novel *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent*.

is not that of the poet himself, but rather the voice of a song – ‘bleeding and angry’, – a song that was picked up in the field:

*W białe noce, od rżysk i gumien,
porośniętych i mchem, i mgłą,
pozbierałem tę pieśń, jak umiem,
i przynoszę skrwawioną, złą*

[...]

*Raz ta pieśń – zaszła mnie w życie, za łaką,
powaliła, przygniotła, kazała: służ!
i wyrwała mi język jak płony kąkol,
a miast niego wetknęła mi nóż*

*Przyszła zimą skostniała, skomlała: milczę!
przypytała się: ogrzej! jęczyła: krew!
A w zanadrzu urosła w żarłoczne wilczę
nakarmiła się sercem, siegnęła trzew --*

[...]

*na glinianej przynoszę wam misie
tę złą pieśń – mój największy skarb! (1972:102-104)*

During white nights, from the stubbles and barns,
overgrown with moss, and fog,
I collected this song, the only way I know,
and I bring it to you bleeding and angry.

[...]

Once this song called on me in a rye-field, past the meadow,
it threw me down, pressed to the ground, ordered: serve!
it pulled out my tongue like a worthless ear of corn,
and instead it put a knife in my mouth.

Frozen to death it returned in winter, whimpering: I am silent!
it begged: warm me up! it groaned: blood!
But in my bosom it grew into a voracious wolf,
it fed on my heart, it reached into my guts --

[...]

in a clay vessel I bring you now
this angry song -- my greatest treasure!

The prologue speaks of the song as an incongruous, grotesque being possessing life and desires of its own. Through the process of personification, the song becomes a threatening creature that groans, moans and begs; it is a malicious and bizarre beast – ‘a voracious wolf’ that feeds on the poet’s heart and pulls his tongue out, but nevertheless it remains his ‘greatest treasure’. Through this conspicuously threatening grotesque imagery the prologue sets the atmosphere for the rest of the poem as ambivalent, bizarre, and violent. From the vantage point of narrative technique, the prologue clearly indicates the shift of the narrative viewpoint from ‘I’ to ‘it’, that is to the song with its rich folk tradition,⁹⁸ the song which is able to proceed on its own. Jasieński needed that ‘mask’ of a folk song for reasons of ‘narrative mimicry’⁹⁹ to expose ‘the essential truth about the anti-feudal insurrection’ (Rawiński 1971:89) and to ‘transmit dissatisfaction with social injustice, to provide slogans of revolution in the form closest to common experience’ (Kolesnikoff 1982:61). Although these views are legitimate, the prologue to the poem clearly indicates that above all Jasieński needed the folk song form to shield himself from charges that the universe he creates in the poem is bizarre and departs from the natural harmony and order of life as we know it.

Because the poem simulates the brisk rhythm of merry and dynamic folk songs, one of the most overpowering impressions *The Lay of Jakub Szela* has on the reader is that its universe is in constant motion. Initially the whole universe – animals, people and objects – seem to be living in mirth and harmony. The poem begins with ‘a formidable grotesque fresco’ (Rawiński 1971:86), which relates a frantic wedding dance. It seems that there is no limit to utter happiness in this unrestrained union of man and beast, nature and objects:

⁹⁸ Although the influence of folk canon on the poem seems to be the favourite topic of its analysis by critics thus far, there still is considerable potential not only for comparative (formal) but critical (semantic) analysis of Jasieński’s ingenious use of folk songs. For a comparative analysis see M. Rawiński ‘U genezy wczesnej twórczości poetyckiej Brunona Jasieńskiego’. Wrocław, 1969, and ‘*Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* Brunona Jasieńskiego wobec folkloru’, 1971.

⁹⁹ Known as the *skaz* technique in Russian literary criticism, it was first described by Boris Eikhbaum in his 1924 essay ‘Как сделана *Шинель Гоголя*’. The significance of this technique for the writer of the grotesque is considerable. Erlich, who accepts *skaz* as a mask assumed by an author, characterises it as ‘the mimicry of intonational, lexical and phraseological mannerisms of a low-brow narrator’ (1969:146).

*Tańcowała izba, stół,
cztery konie, piąty wół.
Tańcowały krowy z obór,
jak w tancerkach był niedobór.*

*Tańcowała izba, sień –
Jak ci bida, to się żen!
Z korimi – wiadra, z ludźmi – konwie,
jeden Bóg ich z których stron wie.*

*Tańcowały skrzypce, bas,
biała droga w czarny las.
Wyrzucała nogi-wierzby
na gościńcu, bo i gdzieżby?*

*Tańcowała izba, wieś –
Jak ci bida – mam cię gdzieś! (1972:104-105)*

Dancing were a table and a room,
four horses, fifth was the bull.
Dancing were cows from sheds
if there were not enough dancing girls.

Dancing were a room and a hall –
If you are poor, get wed!
With horses – buckets, with people – jugs,
only God knows how they do it.

Dancing were a violin and a bass viola,
white road leading to the black forest.
It was throwing its legs-willows¹⁰⁰
on the road, where else?

Dancing were a room and a village –
If you are poor – I don't know you!

Sterna-Wachowiak rightly points out the device of 'folk anthropomorphism' (1985:117) which here as much as elsewhere in the poem permits objects, celestial bodies, fragments of landscape and animals not only to imitate human behaviour but also to coexist amicably. The dance seems to embody an innocuous suspension of all natural laws for the period of

¹⁰⁰ Literal translation. Jasieński refers to the element considered to be typical of the Polish landscape in which country roads are usually defined by the rows of willow trees. Since in the poem the road is personified, according to the logic of the poem, it has to have legs like any other being.

the celebration defined by Bakhtin in terms of a carnival ceremony as ‘the second life of the people, who for a time enter the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance’ (1984b:9).¹⁰¹ The grotesque seems to be of that playful kind frequently evident in folk literature, including fairy-tales, where various wonders and miracles are accepted without the blink of an eye. But under this apparent harmonious coexistence of incompatible phenomena there lurks a premonition of possible tensions. It can be detected in the references to poverty. The proverb *Jak ci bida, to siężen!* ('if you have worries – get married') draws our attention because it is clearly out of context and it disrupts the logic of the stanza.¹⁰² Its use seems to be justified only by the rhythm and the rhyme of a folk song, yet, the reference to poverty is made again, this time more directly: *jak ci bida – mam cię gdzieś* ('if you are poor – I don't know you'). The jubilant tone of the poem is also undercut by its imagery: cows replacing dancing girls, horses dancing with buckets, people with jugs. The most bizarre is the surrealistic image of a *road* dancing ‘on the road, where else?’ – a clearly intended tautology, betraying the kind of humour which is typical of the author of the grotesque – a smile through clenched teeth.

Nevertheless, the whole universe continues this strange dance even when it reaches the culmination of the action when a similarly vivacious rhythm of folk dance characterises all the scenes depicting the bloody mutiny of peasants:

*Jak dojrzały izby
w polu samych brzędzący,
podkasały kiecki-ściany
po śniegu lecący.*

¹⁰¹ The application of Bakhtin's theory and his concept of carnival to this poem is limited, for its climax does not depend on the ‘carnival sense of the world’ as defined by Bakhtin (1984a:122-123) but rather on its grotesque aberration. In Bakhtin's view carnival wars are ‘bloodless’ (*ibid.*:125); Jasieński's war is real although it is disguised as a celebration of freedom. The suspension of hierarchy – the temporal fraternity of the gentry and the peasants – as demanded by Bakhtin, is entirely illusory in Jasieński's poem.

¹⁰² Jasieński's use of the proverb exposes its ambiguity. Normally *bida* (dialect; its correct form *bieda*) in this proverb means ‘trouble’, ‘worries’, but it can also mean ‘social deprivation’. That Jasieński uses it in its alternative, unusual for the proverb meaning, becomes clear, when he refers to poverty again, this time directly.

*Przegonił je wiatrak,
w dyrdy biegł przez odlóg,
ruszył w taniec opętaniec,
poszły wióry z podłog.*

*Tańcowali cztery dni
ani więcej, ani mniej.
Tańcowali piątą noc –
runął dwór jak zgniły kloc.*

*Tańcowali rach-ciach-ciach
i po drogach i po wsiach.
Tańcowali, gdzie kto mógł.
Tryskał, pryskał śnieg spod nóg.*

*Szedł śnieg. Brał mróz.
Biegł zbieg. W mróz wróś.
Z ust krew – as kier.
Znad drew mgła skier. (1972:140-141)*

When huts saw
all these sprats in the fields,
they tucked up their skirts-walls
running through the snow.

The windmill overtook them,
running swiftly through a fallow land,
mad,¹⁰³ it rushed into the dance,
wooden shavings striking on a floor.

They were dancing for four days
nor more, no less.
They were dancing for the fifth night –
the manor fell like a rotten log.

They were dancing *rach-ciach-ciach*¹⁰⁴
on the roads and in villages.
They were dancing where they could.
Snow spattered, splattered from under their feet.

¹⁰³ *Opętaniec* means ‘mad’, ‘possessed’ or ‘frantic’. Judging by the way it is used, it may qualify both the dance and the windmill.

¹⁰⁴ Read: *rakh-chyakh-chyakh*. According to conventions of onomatopoeia, this word formation imitates both the sound of legs shuffling on the floor in a dance, and the sound of cutting, not only cutting through the air with a sharp blade, but also sawing a log.

Snow came. Frost set.
 Fugitive runs. Froze stiff.
 Blood from mouth – ace of hearts.
 Sparks mist above the trees.

The jolly rhythm of the dance is emphasised by replacing the quatrain with the distich. The organisation of stanzas clearly imitates the rhythm of dance itself. The jubilant tone is only interrupted by the last stanza. This stanza confirms the menacing nature of this dance, which initially we only could sense in the image of huts running through the snowy fields like women with their skirts tucked up suggesting that they might be running in great anxiety. The windmill, which in its awkward shape imitates a human figure, especially that of a madman throwing his limbs uncontrollably in all directions, like huts, evokes laughter at the same time as looking alarmingly disturbing.¹⁰⁵ But the truly frightful nature of this dance becomes apparent only in the stanza that makes reference to the image of a fugitive, wounded or perhaps killed. It is a frosty night, blood is frozen on his lips, while the ominous glow of burning manor houses illuminates this gruesome scene. The simile: the blood on the lips – ace of hearts – the dead man and the association with the image of cards – not only entirely destroys the remnants of the corpse's humanity, but also introduces an element of circus, if one imagines the blood frozen on his lips in a heart-like shape that makes him look like a clown. The focus on the visual aspect of the scene instead of on its content, in other words the focus on how it looks and not on what its emotional implications are, is typical of the grotesque challenge to our own sense of tragedy.

Fully to understand the function of this image in Jasieński's poem, one has to know nineteenth-century Polish patriotic literature. The 'fugitive' as a rule was an insurgent fleeing from the tsar's army or prison, and whose image the whole nation worshipped as an embodiment of patriotism.¹⁰⁶ Jasieński, who makes it his aim in the poem to weigh

¹⁰⁵ As Khouri notes, the image of the human body is one of the most effective referents for the grotesque. (N. Khouri, 'The Grotesque: Archeology of an Anti-Code.' *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*. Vol. XXIII(2), 1980:21.

¹⁰⁶ Compare the opening passages in *Wierna rzeka* ('Faithful River', 1913) by Stefan Żeromski.

national independence against social freedom, ridicules the cherished symbol of the national tradition. Even if we understand that the rejection of any tradition – not merely that which is ‘national’ – was part of Jasieński’s aesthetic programme, the way he demonstrates it – through the grotesque degradation of the ideal – is the main cause of the poem’s acrimonious reception in Poland.¹⁰⁷ Probably if Jasieński had written his poem in a realistic mode and argued the cause of the peasantry in a more direct way, the poem would have been much more palatable to the public, but the point is that Jasieński did not intend to negate the value of the national struggle for freedom, the benefits of which he was reaping by living in a free Poland – even if he was temporarily staying in France.¹⁰⁸ As he stated clearly in the introduction to *The Lay of Jakub Szela*, he only intended to show another truth, a different perspective from the one commonly accepted.¹⁰⁹ His intention was not to falsify history or to present the rebellion, the bloody mutiny, as an *objectively* justifiable deed. He was as horrified by its vicious brutality as any one in his sane mind would be, which is why the image of the rebellion is grotesque and ambivalent. The mutiny is both a vicious massacre and a celebration, which can be interpreted as Jasieński’s attempt to understand why the rebellion was so brutal. He saw it as revenge for the ‘millennium’ of oppression and slavery; hence the peasants in the poem dance with squires

¹⁰⁷ Criticism of the poem is briefly summarised by Dziarnowska (1982:158-164), while Jasieński himself noted in his ‘Last Testimony’ the disappointing reception of the poem among the Communists, quoting Dąbal who summarised it as ‘an antiquated petty-bourgeois individualism manifesting itself in the overexposure of the poem’s central protagonist, the peasant leader Jakub Szela, at the expense of too schematic a portrayal of the peasant masses themselves, who in the poem are present only in the background’ (in Jaworski 1995:152).

¹⁰⁸ An acquaintance who met Jasieński in Paris recalls how much he missed Poland: ‘He was gloomy, agitated, simply sad. He spoke of how much he missed Cracow, that he would give anything to be there again. [...] He wanted to know everything about Cracow when he learned that I had left the city only recently’ (Zechenter 1965:7).

¹⁰⁹ From the nineteenth century onwards, the perception was that only the nobility was involved in the independence struggle, while the peasantry remained indifferent, if not altogether hostile to the cause of national sovereignty. Such a portrayal is perpetuated by Żeromski’s novel *Faithful River* or his novella *Rozdziobią nas kruki, wrony...* (‘We Shall Be Ripped Apart by Crows and Ravens...’) which describes a drastic incident involving a peasant ripping off the clothes from a dead insurgent.

‘tooth for tooth’ and that is why the blood flows in huge quantities as seen in further stanzas which describe the routine of destruction with cold precision:

*Tańcowali w tył i wprost,
kto po lodzie, kto przez most,
[...]*

*Tańcowali z chłopem pan
milczkiem-boczkiem koło ścian.
Tańczył rządca, tańczył dziedzic
żaden nie chciał w miejscu siedzieć.*

*Tańcowali ząb o ząb –
z sieni okiem i na klomb.
Tańcowali z góry w dół,
coraz któryś w tarću padał.*

*Tańcowali raz po raz
chłopska kosa, pański pas.
Od ogródka do ogródka
ciekła rowem krew jak wódka.*

*Tańcowali – z panem pień
Była noc jak biały dzień (1972:142)*

They were dancing back and straight,
some on ice, some on a bridge,
[...]

They were dancing lord with peasant
silently-quietly next to walls.
Land-steward danced, a squire danced,
none wanted to sit in place.

They were dancing tooth by tooth –
from a hall through a window and on a flower-bed.
They were dancing up and down
Now and again someone was falling down.

They were dancing one by one
peasant’s scythe and squire’s waist.
From garden to garden,
blood streaming in a ditch like vodka.

They were dancing – squire with a trunk.
The night was as white as day.

The grotesque character of these stanzas is more explicit than it was in the fragment quoted earlier. The reader clearly realises that this ominous dance is an encoded description of something horrific: there are direct allusion to fires ('the night was as white as day'), 'blood streaming like vodka', although the similarity to the wedding dance is maintained. We may recall that at the end of the wedding dance 'a stream of vodka flew in a ditch' (111).

One of the principles of the grotesque is that nothing should be taken at face value. The dance, its explicit joviality, along with the poem's exuberant tone, mask the true nature of the events which the poem portrays – the most cruel and brutal slaughter of defenceless people caught unaware on a cold early spring night. The truth is that whole families were savagely wiped out in several districts while their manors were burned.¹¹⁰ Transposing Szela from history into the imaginary world of his poem, Jasieński remains true to the actual historical account of the mutiny itself – that is, as true as the demands of the grotesque permit him.

The fact that he chooses to portray the rebellion as a dance is grotesque from the start. The brutal act is presented as something which usually evokes pleasant associations, something which epitomises happiness. The underlying basis for such grotesque device derives both from the semantic and the visual juxtaposition of dancing with fighting. The idea of dance is to bring people together; dance is designed as an orderly, harmonious movement. A seemingly similar interaction of people takes place in a fight. But the idea of fight is to set people apart; the only reason for their coming together is to destroy one another. The fight is an act of aggression which entirely contradicts the amicable character of dance. The juxtaposition is false. It is not only intrinsically contradictory but also ironically ludicrous if one considers that the movement in a dance is based on the intention

¹¹⁰ The horror of the actual massacre of gentry which took place in 1846 survives in the memory of the people in Galicia to this day. I recall reading as a child a collection of legends *Przy kominie o szarej godzinie* ('Evening Stories at the Fireplace'), dominated by stories about haunted half-burned manors, filled with horrific cries of brutalised people, where at night human corpses sown in half fall down the chimney.

to play and look gracious, while the movement in a fight is a premeditated act to inflict harm.

This illusory affinity between a dance and a fight is reflected by language which permits figurative references to dancing also to designate fighting. Thus the *bona fide* expression *zatańczyć z kimś*, 'to dance with someone', if taken figuratively means 'to argue' or 'to fight'. Being an avant-garde artist, Jasieński well knows how language can be used to manipulate reality. He applies set metaphoric expressions, expecting the reader to adapt semantics in accordance with the situation presented. To a native Polish reader the fragment sounds like a sequence of innocuous, frequently used proverbial expressions: *zatańczyć z kimś*, 'to dance with someone', means 'to teach someone a lesson' or 'to settle accounts', which in itself is a metaphoric expression for avenging injustice, like *ząb za ząb*, 'tooth for tooth', or 'tit for tat' are universally understood as repaying wrongs; *tańczyć do upadłego*, means 'to dance till you drop'. But although clearly identifiable, these expressions are not used in the poem in precisely the same wording as they are traditionally known. The poet incorporates them in a folk song, introducing minor stylistic alterations, for example instead of *ząb za ząb* ('tooth for tooth') he uses *ząb o ząb* ('tooth by tooth') which compels the reader to confront these expressions simultaneously in both their figurative and their literal meanings. Thus the image of a squire dancing with a peasant 'tooth by tooth' till they drop captures the motion, the determination and the sinister nature of this 'union' of antagonistic social classes.

The image of the dance-rebellion and its structural components resemble the wedding dance; the method of putting together people, animals and various other bodies and objects which we normally do not see interacting, is indeed similar both. However, the differences are more significant. A parallel reading of the two dance scenes reveals Jasieński's approach to building his grotesque images. Thus in the wedding dance, for instance, the buckets are dancing with people. All the elements necessary for the grotesque are vividly present in this image which is simultaneously ludicrous and incongruous; it is also ambivalent, for the relationship of a human being with an object is not openly defined. It is simply contrary to common sense for a sane person intentionally to engage in a dance

with an object, although the fantasy as such is harmless, especially if taken out of the poem's context. In the dance-rebellion, the grotesque situation is built differently. We see people: 'lord with peasant' dancing with one another, 'land-steward' and 'a squire' dancing solo. Formally, there is nothing strange in the image as such, again if it is taken out of the poem's wider context, while the content, the meaning hidden under this seemingly normal appearance, is vital for the grotesque. Jasieński's constant game of playing form against content – what we see against what it actually is – is an ironic statement that any endeavour to strive towards the 'one and only' version of events is futile because each of us – for different ideological, ethical or aesthetic reasons – has his own version.

Jasieński adopts various artistic strategies to demonstrate his point. Although both the wedding and the rebellion dances look formally similar, there are significant differences, especially important for the intensely grotesque character of the dance-rebellion. One such difference is the technique seemingly adopted from silent movies. If one reads the stanzas describing the battle, there is no reference to sound – everything happens in total silence. In the wedding dance, by contrast, not only are specific musical instruments mentioned (violin, bass viola), but actual music is heard; the whole concert is presented as a conversation between various instruments in the wedding orchestra. The function of music is to create the wedding atmosphere and to inform the readers about the bride's feelings. The lack of references to sound in the scene of rebellion contrasts the dynamic commotion with the deafening silence, which in turn throws an even more menacing light on the whole scene. The characters peopling this scene might be crying and shouting for help, screaming in horror and pain, but we only see the image, the visual half of what is really happening. The grotesque character of this scene intensifies as our response to it is unresolved, for even if we suspect that the scene refers to the killing of defenceless people, the commotion – people running ('none wanted to sit in place'), some are waving dangerous objects – potentially evokes laughter.

Another very important difference is that in the wedding dance there is much less emphasis on human participation. The reference to the cows replacing girls in a dance can be

interpreted in terms of sordid folk humour and Jasieński's own rather misogynic treatment of female characters in all his works. In the dance-rebellion, the human body is central – both literally and as a shape – so that despite typical grotesque ambiguity, the 'dance' can be unequivocally visualised in all its horrifying brutality.¹¹¹ The huts and windmills in the earlier fragment are not only personified but they physically resemble the human body. This time, however, the union of humans and objects is no longer innocuous and the 'peasant's scythe and squire's waist' as well as the squire dancing with a 'trunk' of a tree openly alludes to the landowners being brutally murdered in cold blood.

The parallel between the wedding dance and the rebellion is only formal, including the duration of each of the dances: the wedding dance lasted 'four nights, fifth was the day' (111). The rebellion lasted 'four days no more no less' and the night was the fifth (141). The slight difference in emphasis (the wedding at night, the rebellion mostly during the day) makes us look more closely at this apparent parallel and only then do we begin to see the intrinsic logic of the poem's structure; we begin to understand why Jasieński decided to open the poem with a description of Szela's wedding.

Under the surface of jovial tonality in the opening fragment the true nature of this dance lurks: initially unspecified but subsequently openly disclosed. It is the wedding of the thirty-five year old Szela with a young girl not yet fifteen years old. The conversation of musical instruments predicts a bleak future for her ('a growler – widower will beat you' (106)), while Szela's love is presented as devoid of tenderness:

*Idźże, Maryś, tańczyć, idźże!
Już mi dzisiaj cię nikt nie wydrze,
już nie ujdzieś, jakbys w dno wrósił,
już nas związał księżyc powróz.* (1972:108)

¹¹¹ See Mc Elroy: 'As an aesthetic category, the grotesque is physical, predominantly visual. Its true habitat is in pictorial and plastic art; in literature, it is created by narration and description which evokes scenes and characters that can be visualised as grotesque' (1989:6-7). This of course applies not only to the scene of dance discussed here, but to any grotesque work, and the 'visual' quality of Jasieński's own writing is frequently emphasised in this study.

Go, Maryś, dance, go!
 Now no one can snatch you away from me,
 now you cannot escape, as if you were rooted in the bottom,
 now we are bound by a priest's rope.

The celebratory, happy atmosphere of a wedding is suffused with agitation and unspecified apprehension in a manner typical of the grotesque world where things are never what they seem to be. A reader expecting a sentimental description of a happy event is disappointed and confused when what is supposed to be a knot of love is referred to as 'a priest's rope', and when a voluntary union based on love is exposed as a union foregrounded by mutual self-interest. The girl's motivations for marrying Szela are earlier exposed in one of the songs as her greed 'for a bed of carrots' (106); we now learn that Szela's reasons are rooted in lust. The failure of this union becomes reality when Maryś takes a lover, a young farm-hand, Wicus, whom an enraged and jealous Szela kills. The reasoning Szela applies to solving his private marital problem is the same as the reasoning he applies to solve the social problem. Jasieński sees Szela both as a man and as a symbol of the peasantry, thus his wife means to him what ground means to the peasants. The man who stole his wife, the farm-hand, is like a squire who appropriated peasants' right to own ground. To expose the similarity of this relationship, Jasieński uses the grotesque to present the intimate encounter of Maryś and Wicus:

'Weź mię, Wicus, sobą przykryj.
 'Lepszy dzień od nocy przykrej.
 'Taka mali mnie straszna lubość.
 'jeno pójdz mię sobą ubość'

– *Daj mi, Maryś, daj mi z bliska
 – twoich piersi kretowiska.
 – Jak dwie skiby twoja kibić,
 – dajże mi się pługiem wskibic.* (1972:113)

'Take me, Wicus, cover me with yourself.
 'The day is better than an unpleasant night.
 'I am queasy with this strange love,
 'if you only came and horned me with yourself.'

- Give me, Maryś, give me closer
- the molehills of your breasts.
- Like two ridges is your waist,
- let me plough them with my plough.

Jasieński's use of the word-stock typical of peasant life (to horn, molehill, ridge, plough) emphasises the peasant consciousness, but the image of Maryś as earth, and her bold erotic presentation, are born in the flamboyant avant-garde imagination of the poet.¹¹² The conspicuously grotesque figure of woman-like-earth lying spread with 'molehills of breasts' and 'two ridges of waist' is simultaneously the image of a woman and of earth. Equally grotesque and ambivalent is the reference to the sexual act in terms of ploughing the soil. Szela is aware of this parallel relation, hence on the way back from the Governor he thinks of his soil in the way he would about his wife:

*Choć się od znoju tysiącem tycz mięń
potem zapładniaj każdy jej kąt –
cudzy ci na niej wyrosnie jęczmień,
obcy jak bękart nie wiedzieć skąd.*

*Suce starczyło psów z jednej wsi by,
o tę – pokoleń toczy się targ.
Śpi, rozwałila na słońce skiby
tysiącem czarnych sromowych warg.*

*Darmo za chłopa dziedzic ją wydał
ciężko żyć dalej z jedną we dwóch – –
Trzy wskazujące paluchy wideł
wskazują pański, kosmiczny brzuch. (1972:129-130)*

Even if you shimmer from the toil in thousands of rainbows,
inseminate her¹¹³ every corner with your sweat –
someone else's barley will grow on her,
foreign like a bastard who comes from nowhere.

¹¹² This eroticism could easily have turned into vulgarity had Jasieński not been sufficiently selective. For instance, if instead of the univocal verb *przykryj* 'to cover' (e.g. to keep warm), he had used *pokryj* which has an ambivalent meaning like the English verb 'to cover', one of the meanings of which implies the mounting of animals. The word-play is sufficient to enhance the grotesque without compromising the artistic value of the passage.

¹¹³ In the original *ziemia* (feminine) meaning 'earth', 'land', 'soil', or 'ground'.

A bitch can find enough dogs in one village,
about her – the generations have bargained.
Sleeping, she sprawled her ridges in the sun
with a thousand of black lips of pudendum.

For nothing¹¹⁴ the squire married her to a peasant.
Its hard for both to live with one for much longer --
Three index-fingers of dung fork
point at the lordly, cosmic belly.

The poem's logic that the human body and the earth are similar in shape and function reflect Szela's own philosophy that nature and the people are one and are subordinated to the same laws. In Slavic folklore it is not unusual to refer to the earth as '*mother-earth*'. Everything in *The Lay of Jakub Szela* seem to fit archetypal folk imagery, but Jasieński ironises the sublime interpretation of this simile. The nurturing and procreation that traditionally unite female and land in one force responsible for sustaining and perpetuating life is exposed as debauchery and fornication in his poem. Both earth and a woman are lascivious creatures, both capable of giving birth only to illegitimate offspring. Maryś might have given Szela a bastard child from her coupling with a farm-hand, while the ground carries a bastard yield. The grotesque degradation of the traditional understanding of female-earth in the poem is meant to motivate the bitterness and brutality of both Szela and peasants in their respective acts of cruel retaliation.

Thus while formally the presentation of the rebellion is indebted to the wedding dance, its meaning is paralleled with Szela's retaliation for his wife's betrayal. Szela's encounter with his wife's lover exposes his determination to fight for what belongs to him. The scene stands out from the poem's phantasmagoric mobile spectacle as surprisingly static and realistic, as if it were a rehearsal for the scene of rebellion: measured, calculated motion with the intention to kill. We may even note that like the duration of the wedding dance and the rebellion, Szela's revenge is also measured in four and summarised on the count of five:

¹¹⁴ In the original *darmo*, meaning 'free of charge', 'for nothing', but also 'in vain', 'to no avail'.

*Jak uderzył Szela raz,
Przykląkł Wicuś, zgiązł się w pas.*

*Jak uderzył Szela drugi –
poszyły nosem krwi dwie strugi.*

*Jak uderzył w skroni, nad brwią,
przysiadł Wicuś, charknął krwią*

*Jak uderzył czwarty z prosta,
upadł Wicuś, tak już został.*

*Otarł Szela krwawy farsz:
[...] (1972:113)*

When Szela hit him for the first time,
Wicuś kneeled, bent in half.

When Szela hit the second [time]
two streams of blood came from Wicuś's nose.

When Szela hit him in the temple right above the brow,
Wicuś crouched and coughed his blood.

When Szela hit him the fourth [time] – straight,
Wicuś fell and stayed this way.

Szela wiped the bloody stuff:
[...]

The grotesque is perceptible not in the scene itself but rather in its juxtaposition with the context. It follows the vibrant love scene; our sympathy is divided, for we know that Szela kills the younger man not out of love for his wife but in revenge for snatching his possession. Jasieński does not idealise Szela; he presents him as an obdurate peasant who cares little for higher feelings and lofty ideals. Jasieński's Szela has his own view of things and imposes his own law.

The personality of the historical figure of Szela and whether or not his wife betrayed him is only as important as the poem's grotesque character.¹¹⁵ The historical data which is identifiable in the poem, including the name of its hero as well as the names of villages (Smarzowa, Siedliska (172:142)) in which the rebellion took place, is part of Jasieński's plan to shock the audience, to highlight the issue of social oppression which was only partially resolved during Jasieński's lifetime,¹¹⁶ by touching an extremely sensitive national nerve. From the point of view of the grotesque, the inclusion of authentic historical figures in an otherwise fantastic universe is designed to render this fantastic universe grotesque. Thus although the comparison of Jasieński's Szela with the historical figure is interesting (see Stern 1969:101-113), its relevance to the poem's interpretation is limited. Discrepancies significantly enough generally concern minor facts,¹¹⁷ unimportant from the point of view of the poem's 'cause'. Inaccuracies are introduced deliberately and despite Jasieński's thorough knowledge of the historical data (see *ibid.*:107). These 'inaccuracies' clearly indicate that the poet was concerned less with creating a character true to historical documents than with creating a metaphor for the peasants' struggle for freedom so misunderstood and misrepresented by official historians. The one major 'discrepancy' has a similar significance – Szela in Jasieński's poem is hanged. This deliberate 'alteration' of known facts further proves that Jasieński treated documents and history only as a point of departure from which he constructed Szela as the property of his artistic imagination. He warned readers to expect this in his introduction:

¹¹⁵ As Stern notes, the real Szela was obsessively jealous but Jasieński could not have known this as this information was established after the poem was written (1969:108-109). The 'lover' motif is thus clearly Jasieński's invention subordinated to the intrinsic logic of the poem.

¹¹⁶ The partial emancipation of peasants took place approximately twenty years after the rebellion. In Jasieński's time peasants were still subjected to repressive policies. The land was in possession of the gentry and if not by law then by economic hardship peasants were still forced to work on the landowners' fields.

¹¹⁷ For instance, Szela's age in the poem is thirty-five while the real Szela was forty years old at the time of the rebellion. In the poem Maryś is Szela's fourth wife and her age is fourteen and a half (*miała roków półpiętnasta*), while in fact seventeen-year old Salomea was his second wife (Stern 1969:102, 108).

Gdyby nawet Szela historyczny nie istniał, to, w interesie o cały świat świadomości klasowej wzbogaconej kultury polskiej, należałoby go wymyślić.

Gdyby Szela isniejący nie był bohaterem, to i wówczas, w imię męczeńskiej epopei krzywdy chłopskiej, należałoby go dźwignąć na wyżyny heroizmu.

Tym bardziej, skoro istniał i skoro posiada wszystkie cechy bohaterstwa, obowiązkiem naszym jest go ożywić. (1972:245)

Even if the historical Szela had not existed, he should be invented for the benefit of Polish culture enriched by the whole [new] world of the class consciousness.

Even if the real Szela was not a hero, even then, in the name of the martyrdom suffered by the peasantry, he should be elevated to the levels of heroism.

But since he existed and had all characteristics of a hero, it is our duty to bring him to life.

Jasieński's statement should be read as a perpetuation of his views on the reciprocal relationship between art and life: life fertilises art which in turn nourishes and shapes life. Thus Jasieński's expression 'bring to life' should not be taken literally but metaphorically. Any character brought to life in a work of art exists only in the illusory world, on the basis of mutual understanding between reader and author. While in realistic literature this understanding is less important, in a grotesque work it is paramount. Taken at face value, the grotesque work leads to endless misunderstandings, that is why Jasieński frequently faced the hostility of his readership.

Jasieński's approach to historical data is not surprising; it is the same attitude he expressed earlier to life in general. The analysis of Jasieński's earlier poetry sought to demonstrate that on many occasions the poet questioned the possibility of knowing the ideal truth. He examined the altering effect that different phenomena have on objective reality. The camera, for instance, could show only a small fragment of life; hunger caused the poet to hallucinate; lamps seen through rain looked as if they were in a phantasmagoric trance. To these natural physiological and psychological phenomena which may alter or influence one's perception, Jasieński adds 'class consciousness', posing the question not only 'what truth?' – for instance, the truth of day or the truth of night, the truth of eye or the truth of camera? – but more importantly, 'whose truth?' – the truth of a victim or the truth of a

tormentor?¹¹⁸ In *The Lay of Jakub Szela* it is the truth of the peasants, the truth of the oppressed masses that is juxtaposed against the officially accepted truth. While the earlier poems probe the relativity of 'truth' in examples drawn in the present from the poet's immediate surrounding, in *The Lay of Jakub Szela* Jasieński examines the problem in relation to a subject taken from the past. Strictly speaking, the subject could also be imagined or placed in the future, but its emotional resonance would not have been so powerful as when the national tradition and accepted history is openly revised.¹¹⁹ This, however, is not at all a sufficient reason to treat *The Lay of Jakub Szela* as an historical poem or as the biography of the peasant leader. Literature was for Jasieński, as he put it in the *Expose*, 'a refined game' and those who do not understand it, he calls 'barbarians' (1972:218].

¹¹⁸ Compare with *The City* where the two different versions of the same incident are juxtaposed: the view of a 'dishevelled girl' moaning that the old man 'finished' her off and the view of the old man shouting that she stole his money (quoted on p. 128).

¹¹⁹ Jasieński's method is comparable to that of Zamiatiń in his dystopia *Мы* 'We' in which he probes the combination of technological civilisation and ideological fanaticism describing its effect on the imaginary society of the future. The fact that Zamiatiń's anti-totalitarian satire has a ring of authenticity is purely coincidental. In 1922 Zamiatiń could not have known that his vision of a totalitarian society would materialise almost literally under Stalin's dictatorship.

CHAPTER V

THE CONFLATION OF BODY AND MACHINE IN *THE LEGS OF ISOLDA MORGAN*¹

One of the central themes in Futuristic poetics was the modern technological phenomenon of the machine. In this chapter, Jasieński's early prose work, a novella *Nogi Izoldy Morgan* ('The Legs of Isolda Morgan'),² will be examined with the intention to show both its author's perception of the machine and its impact on his perception of the human body. As in his poetry, in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* Jasieński also relies on the grotesque, which effectively hinders the possibility of distinguishing his own views as the author of the story from those of its narrator or its chief character, Berg. The grotesque serves also as a distorting mirror in which the absurd dehumanised world of modern hybrids composed of human, mechanical, and animal elements mocks its own incongruity.

For the Futurists the machine was not only a specific artificial structure of components put together with a designed purpose, that is an apparatus using and applying mechanical power, but it was also an important concept of an organised system, a concept of shape and function. The machine featured in all Futuristic programmes, and its understanding predetermined the distinctiveness of Italian, Russian and Polish Futurism (see Jasieński 1972:235-237). But, regardless of this attitude,³ the machine became one of the most

¹ In this study, reference is made in the text to collection *Nogi Izoldy Morgan i inne opowiadania* ('The Legs of Isolda Morgan' and Other Stories'). Warszawa 1966:19-35. In this chapter, all quotations from this source are indicated by the page number only.

² Jasieński refers to *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* as *książka* ('a book') and *powieść* ('a novel'), explaining its brevity (less than 20 pages) in terms of its having an 'architecture of reinforced concrete' (*powieść ta ma właściwie tyle stron ile ma [...] i jest w architekturze swojej żelazobetonowej*) (*ibid.*:17). In terms of genre, critics refer to it either, as Jasieński requested, as *powieść* 'novel' (Lubelski 1973), or *nowela* 'short story' or 'novella' (Stern 1969:207).

³ In Jasieński's understanding, Italian Futurism saw the machine as 'the model and ideal of an organism', Russian Futurism 'a product of man, and his servant' and, as represented by him, Polish Futurism looked at it as man's 'superstructure and his new organ' (1972:235-237).

important tokens of modernity (Peiper in Jaworski 1992:208). For Jasieński the concept of the machine based on the principles of 'economy, purpose and dynamics' made him think of an ideal artistic composition (1972:202). He considered 'the telegraphic apparatus of Morse [to be] a 1000⁴ times greater masterpiece of art than Byron's *Don Juan*' (ibid.:205). As a modern man Jasieński realised the potential of the machine as an apparatus in expanding the knowledge of the world. He made that point in *The Polish Futurism (Summary)* where he wrote that the machine is man's 'new organ' (Ibid.:236), 'a tentacle' with which man will 'embrace the world' (ibid.:237). In his poems he depicted the joy of speed and its impact on the view of the world, as in the poem *Miłość na aucie* ('Love on a Car'), where he notes that the speed of a car puts the whole world in motion while those sitting in it seem to remain in place:

[...]

Zbity licznik pokazywał 160 kilometrów.

Koło nas leciały pola rozpluskanych, żółtych zbóż

Koło nas leciały lasy, i zagaja, i mokradła,

Jakaś łąka, jakaś rzeka, jakaś w drzewach skryta wieś

[...] (1972:10)

[...]

Golden odometer was showing 160 kilometres.

Next to us were flying fields of yellow corn splashed all over.

Next to us were flying forests, and woods, and swamps,

Some meadow, a river, and a hamlet hidden in the trees.

[...]

In other poems, such as *Ran him Over* (see earlier p. 125-126) a streetcar is responsible for the death of a man, while in *The City* a vehicle assumed certain frightening animal characteristics (see Jasieński 1972:63, 67). Similar ominous implications of using machines

⁴ Jasieński usually used cyphers instead of written numbers. It was part of Futuristic policy of using any possible means to draw attention to what is being said. One agrees that 'a thousand' implies metaphorically a large quantity, while written as a cypher, 1000 emphasises precise calculation.

are evident in the poem *Trupy z kawiorem* ('Corpses with Caviar'), where a joyous ride in a motorcar ends tragically for its passengers:

*Zatwostepią latarnie w oszalonym rozpędzie,
 Zamigocą się domy i osunąć się w dół.
 Pójdą słupy i słupy i kosmate gałęzie,
 Samym lotem z łoskotem rozcinane przez pół.

 A w ustronnym salonie kiedyś późno wieczorem,
 Kiedy będzie znów jasno i wesoło i że...
 Blady lokaj we fraku nasze trupy z kawiorem
 Poda sennie na tacy wytwornemu milieu... (1972:15-16)*

The street lamps will dance a 'two-step' in maddening acceleration,
 Houses will flash and sink down.
 The lamp-posts and lamp-posts and shaggy branches will go
 With racket cut in half by the very speed.

And some late evening in a spacious drawing room,
 When again it will be bright and merry and bad...
 Pale lackey, dressed in a swallow-tail coat, our corpses with caviar
 will serve on a tray to the refined *milieu*.

The unexpected final point emphasises the grotesque play with the absurd. The image of corpses with caviar is incongruous, macabre, yet humorous, for we sense in it the poet's mockery directed at the refined social élite. With the help of this mischievous joke, the poet wriggles out of giving the reader a key to the poem's deeper meaning.⁵ The point about machines however subtly, is made: machines pose a threat to human life.

Jasieński's references to machines, both in their conceptual and material form, are ambivalent. He simultaneously embraces their potential and fears them. The car can kill; from here there is only one step to seeing machines as malevolent mechanical creatures. Their shape and functioning blur the clarity of distinction between human and mechanical,

⁵ *Corpses with Caviar* is one of the poems from the collection *A Shoe in the Buttonhole*. Its nonchalant style and elaborately grotesque imagery (for example, fingers are 'little half-corpses anaemic and blond' and can 'dream of someone who can drown them in kisses') show affinity with the poetry of Russian Ego-Futurists. The poem is one of those that were meant to prove that Jasieński could write like Severyanin, as he assured his readers in *I Am Tired of Language* (see 1972:47).

affecting the primordial conceptualisation in the polarity human versus animal. With these suppositions in mind, Jasieński begun writing his bizarre story about legs. But Jasieński's view of the machine is as much the result of his own reflection as the result of vivid discussions in the circle of his associates, where a prominent position was held by Tytus Czyżewski⁶ the author of *Hymn do maszyny mego ciała* ('Hymn to the Machine of My Body'), published in 1921. The poem is as unconventional in its layout as it is in its ambivalent imagery. It is written in two columns with diagrams representing the structure of the human body and links between its various organs. Using technical terminology, the poem describes the human anatomy. Czyżewski writes about the cables of veins, twisted wires leading to the heart, the body's battery, and so forth. In its conclusion, the poem identifies the functioning of a human body with the functioning of a machine: the brain sends a telephonic message to the body's other organs and orders them to switch to *żyj* 'live' (see Carpenter 1983:27). This poem, which Jasieński must have read – it was first published in the same *Leaflet of Futurists*⁷ in which he published his own manifestos – must have appealed to his imagination by its novelty in looking at the human body and the functions of its organs, but it might also have awakened his apprehension, for it reduced a human being to an automaton. Czyżewski's philosophical fantasy disregards the biological complexity and the interdependence of human organs and reduces life to simply turning a switch on or off.⁸ It is thus possible that Czyżewski's poem prompted Jasieński to investigate the impact of the machine on the consciousness of modern man, both in its character and in its extent, for he posed this problem in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, where

⁶ 'Tytus Czyżewski stands out from the rest of the group of Polish Futurists: he was [20 years] older, and he was a painter as well as a poet' – Carpenter writes of him, emphasising his first-hand knowledge of Western European artistic and literary movements, which he gained while studying painting in Paris (1983:21). Jasieński admits that he met Czyżewski for the first time in 1918, soon after he, that is Jasieński, returned from Russia (1972:224).

⁷ Translation suggested by Carpenter (1983:3); it refers to *Jednodniówka futurystów* where Czyżewski, as well as Jasieński, was one of the editors and contributing authors (see Jaworski 1992:191).

⁸ Jasieński admits in the summary of Polish Futurism that he disagrees with Czyżewski's view of machines, which was close to that of Italian Futurism (1972:226).

he describes 'the process of infection of the modern human psyche by the machine' – as he commented in the summary of Polish Futurism (1972:225).

The novella *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* was published in Lvov in 1923 (Jasieński 1972:217) but Stern suggests that it might have been written at the very beginning of Jasieński's creative life, earlier than most of his important poems such as, for instance, *A Song about Hunger* (1969:210). Indeed, the novella shares many of its characteristics with Jasieński's poetry, especially its morbid tonality and outlandish metaphoric language: 'jumping kaleidoscope of trees in the diaphragm of a window' (19), 'over the swollen "I" of the city a giant dot of the sun' (21) or 'enormous black face of the sky, all in the pimples of stars' (25). It also creates a similar conspicuously grotesque universe where everything is possible, where, for example, life is granted to dismembered limbs, trams 'spit and swallow people' (21), and boundaries between reality and nightmare cease to exist. As Jasieński explained in the *Exposé*,⁹ the character of the story results from 'the accelerated rhythm of contemporary life, which with relentless logic [...] creates an absolutely new kind of reality – a reality of white-hot steel, tottering on the verge of hallucination' (1966:18) As in poetry, here too the narration reports astonishing events without due astonishment and refuses to admit the absurd and the tragedy which it reports. The narration persistently maintains the present tense and, as is the case in many of Jasieński's poems discussed earlier, it is modelled on a technique used in cinematography. For this reason the descriptive element is reduced to a minimum. The dynamic narration resembles a scenario with 'precise instructions for the camera regarding the change of planes and angles' (Lubelski 1973:78) but does not take any emotional position in regard to the related events which happen in spite of normally accepted causality. Occasionally the narration slips into stream of consciousness mode which exposes the protagonist's compulsive obsession with a female body, or his inexplicable fear of machines.

⁹ Jasieński frequently wrote introductory notes to his own works, feeling that he alone was best equipped to explain their meaning. He even wrote *Manifest w sprawie krytyki artystycznej* ('A Manifesto in Respect of Literary Criticism' 1921), where he denounced existing literary criticism as biased and ignorant. He also called upon all authors to write reviews of their own works, especially when 'the thing' broke free of the generally accepted canon. He expected artists to be 'creators, propagators and confessors' of their own art (1972:215-217).

The story also resembles Jasieński's poetry in its urban setting and the strangely ominous character of life in the city. But while in his poetry the grotesque vision of the world could be taken as the poet's own, here it is attributed to the protagonist, although the grotesque character of the plot and its open-endedness prevents us from drawing a final conclusion in this respect, and makes us wonder how much of the protagonist's apprehensions are the author's own. This ambivalence is precalculated by the author who uses the first line of his poem *Ballada o tramwajach* ('A Ballad about Trams') as an epigraph to *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* giving full credits, namely, the title and his own name as its author (see Jasieński 1966:19).¹⁰ At the end of the story an extensive fragment of the poem is cited again, but this time it is attributed to the story's fictitious character, the protagonist Berg. In the same way as the epigraph 'This will happen one afternoon or morning...' pre-empted the story's cryptic content, the extensive quotation which comes as a flash in Berg's mind at the end of the story re-emphasises the inevitability of fate in the world which is strange, threatening and absurd because it is dominated by the machine:

*To się stanie jednego popołudnia czy ranka,
niespodzianie, zwyczajnie, tak, jak wszystko się staje,
zobaczcie, że naraz na narożnych przystankach
nie przystaną łoskotem mijające tramwaje.
Będą pędzić w podskokach, przeskakując z szyn w szyny,
długie szyje poprzecznic przewylocą, jak nurki
zasapane, czerwone, o głupiąk maszyny
18-tki, 16-tki i 4-ki...¹¹ (1966:35)*

This will happen one afternoon or morning,
unexpectedly, ordinarily, as everything always happens,
you will see that suddenly on corner-stops
trams, passing with rambling, won't stop.

¹⁰ The poem is not included in the 1972 selection of Jasieński's poems. The rôle of epigraphs was aptly captured by Zundelovich, a Russian critic close to the Formal school. In his study of the grotesque in Gogol, he noted that 'undoubtedly, an epigraph in general is a kind of mask behind which the author hides when, wishing not to speak directly, he nevertheless wants to express his attitude to the story' (1992:117). Jasieński's choice of epigraphs should always be viewed in this light.

¹¹ The line should read: *osiemnastki, szesnastki i czwórki* (which is the plural form of numbers eighteen, sixteen and four) to rhyme with *nurki* (see footnote 4).

They will dash in leaps, jumping from track to track,
 they will come right through¹² the long necks of cross-streets, like divers,
 breathing heavily, red, stupefied machines
 18's, 16's and 4's...

The fragment of the poem perpetuates the ambivalent portrayal of machines in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*: a tram¹³ is a familiar means of transport, identified for the sake of convenience by numbers, but at the same time it is some strange monster terrorising people. The horror evoked by the monster trams is however downplayed by the description of their ludicrous behaviour, – they jump and dive across streets that themselves resemble some kind of long-necked hydra-like beasts. Instead of logic and order, the universe which the poem creates is ruled by 'surprise' and 'unexpectedness'. By ascribing his own poem to the protagonist of the story, Jasieński suggests that he might be sharing some of Berg's views. Considering the absurdity underlying Berg's perception of the world, we would prefer to know where Jasieński's position coincides with the position of his protagonist, and where he is giving him a critical rebuff. However, the riddle is difficult to solve and in the end the epigraph and Jasieński's open and latent self-quotations mentioned earlier confuse instead of revealing, undermining the readers' trust in the narrator of the story, making him unreliable.

The unreliable narrator is the one who 'vacillates between an all-knowing, all controlling perspective, implying that he is synonymous with the author, and one that indicates he is mocking the reader as well as himself and his work' (Muller Cooke 1982:242). Such tactics are frequently used by the authors of the grotesque, for they successfully enhance the ambivalent character of the whole work. Jasieński uses this tactic in his story not only to express his own apprehensions, but also to save himself from being exposed to criticism

¹² In the original *przewylocą* which is a verb-ncologism created from *na wylot* 'right through'.

¹³ The symbolic meaning of a tram in Jasieński's works is pointed out by Lubelski: 'The motif of a tram appears in Jasieński's early poems frequently as one of the most typical elements of the urban landscape (for example, *Ran him Over*, *The Heat*, *Song about Hunger*). 'Tram' is a key word of Jasieński's poetics, always appearing in the semantic field of 'new technological civilisation' synonymous words such as: machine, motor-car, cinematograph' (1973:71).

or perhaps even ridicule, on the grounds that being a Futurist he is fearful of machines and is unable to comprehend their importance for modern civilisation.

In *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* Jasieński creates a situation based on absurd assumptions, which he attributes to his protagonist, that machines are animated beings aiming to subordinate man: 'The machine developed like a parasite, it has bitten through into all corners of life, from a tool it slowly developed into a master'¹⁴ (1966:30). Although the universe created in the story initially resembles our own, it becomes increasingly alienated owing to Berg's perception of machines. In *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* machines are pictured as creatures that can work, move, even kill, while people are portrayed as some kind of apparatus whose body can be dismembered into parts without showing the effects of organic decay. The underlying intention of the tale's plot is to show that the violent intervention of machines in human life undermines the accepted premises on which the categories of being alive and being human have conventionally been based. The story thus illustrates the reciprocal contamination of previously clearly distinct categories of human and mechanical as a result of people's fascination with the external, purely material nature of life which leads them to misinterpret the essence which underlies these categories. At the same time the story neither points out, nor even attempts to specify the essential qualities which differentiate people from machines, but the dehumanised world, obsessed in the same degree with machines as it is obsessed with the body, 'instills in us fear of life' – as any grotesque world does (Kayser 1981:184). It instills in us fear of *such* life as is portrayed in the story, and in order to overcome this fear we look for those qualities in ourselves which might enable us to retain our humanity intact.

Authors of the grotesque rely on individual responses to the ambivalent universe they create in their works. Thus in the *Exposé* to *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* Jasieński firstly

¹⁴ *Maszyna rozrosła się jak pasożyt, przegryzła się we wszystkie zakątki życia, z narzędziem staje się powoli jego panem.*

warns his readers that the content of the story is 'consciously and consequently double',¹⁵ and secondly he expresses his belief that in a modern novel 'the plot can present itself differently to each and every reader and in this lies its inexhaustible richness' (1966:18, 17, respectively). The 'double' character of the story has its source not only in the unreliable nature of the narrator, but also in its ambivalently strange universe. At one moment it is our familiar world, the next – by virtue of events and images – it assumes some strange fantastic qualities resembling those of a horrifying dream or hallucination which are never actually admitted, or even implied.¹⁶ The narration moves freely from one plane to another without any indications that might provide plausible explanations for those extraordinary shifts of realms. The story begins with the scene of an accident where under the tram numbered 18 lies Isolda's mutilated body. Initially everything proceeds logically: an ambulance is called, Isolda is taken to hospital where she receives a visit from her lover, Berg. Thus far the story seems predictable though tragic. From Isolda's point of view the tragedy is even greater since Berg is unable to offer her love and sympathy. The story takes a strange but still a conceivable turn when Berg goes to the clinic and talks to someone called Lerche about buying Isolda's legs for five hundred francs.¹⁷ The man's

¹⁵ Stating this, he asked 'P.T. [plenum titulum] critics not to discover America' in this respect. Whether critics obliged this request, or were put off by the absurd and highly symbolic plot of the story, the fact is that *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* merited little research. *Anarchia i dyscyplina: O Polskich powieściach Brunona Jasieńskiego* (*Anarchy and Discipline: About Bruno Jasieński's Polish Novels*) by Lubelski is one of the few attempts at deciphering the story's symbolism and interpreting it as the representation of the Futuristic view of the machine (see 1973:71-75).

¹⁶ Some scholars argue that motifs of insanity and dreams do not qualify as grotesque for they provide logical explanation to otherwise absurd stories. For this reason Ludmila Foster, for instance, does not accept Gogol's *Madman's Diary* as a grotesque work (see 1966:80). A different view is expressed by Kayser who believes that 'from an early date, insanity, quasi-insanity and dreams were used to define the source of creativity' and that critics always 'regarded the world of the grotesque as a correlative of insanity' (1981:184). Mc Elroy goes even further, making dreams and insanity central to the point of view in modern grotesque works (1989).

¹⁷ We may note that in French jargon *lerche* means 'very little'. Typically of the grotesque narrative, attention is paid here to an insignificant detail; the surname of an irrelevant character, who never again appears in the story, is meant to lend credibility to the presented events. A similar tactic is frequently seen in Gogol's writings. Gogol is known for his insistence on describing in detail people or objects with no relevance to the course of events, for instance, his detailed description of the carriage in the opening paragraph of *Dead Souls*.

name is an unusual compilation of Slavic *Tymoteusz* and French-sounding *Lerche*, which together with the type of currency, makes the reader wonder where the action was taking place.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is still 'our' world, even though Lerche 'is not in the least surprised' by Berg's unusual request. The reader is allowed to rationalise the situation: firstly, Lerche does it for money; secondly, he considers legs to be *odpadki*, 'refuse' in any case. The situation becomes eerie only when Lerche returns with 'a large elongated packet, neatly wrapped in packing paper. The packet could easily be mistaken for one from a trendy fashion store. The pink ribbon with which it was tied up made it look exquisite' (1966:21). The image of amputated legs in a packet tied up with a pink ribbon is both grisly and, in some strange perverse way, entertaining. It evokes in the reader horror and disgust but also makes us grin, for, as Thomson puts it, 'alongside our civilized response something deep within us, some area of our unconscious, some hidden but very much alive sadistic impulse makes us react to such things¹⁹ with unholy glee and barbaric delight' (1972:9). Images which evoke the response described by Thomson are grotesque images and they belong to the grotesque universe, the only universe which justifies their existence.

Although such images shatter our belief in the rational world, the story returns to 'reality' and life goes on: Berg continues his work, seemingly unaffected by Isolda's tragedy, provoking gossip about the nature of his relationship with her. But the normality is only apparent, and again the question arises: what kind of world is portrayed in the story and what kind of creatures populate it? In an unexpected grotesque twist, and in defiance of all laws of nature, the legs not only continue to thrive after being cut off the woman's

¹⁸ The actual setting does not play any role in this particular story, but the French-sounding surname Lerche, and later mention of francs and of a 'triumphal arch' (*Idą trotuarem w stronge bramy triumfalnej* (1966:31)) suggest that Jasieński played with the idea of Paris – the capital of bourgeois Europe – as a setting for this story, a city in which eventually he was to place the action of his next novel *I Burn Paris*.

¹⁹ For the sake of clarity I should point out that Thomson refers to selected fragments from a number of grotesque works from which he selected 'cruel, abnormal or obscene' scenes which nevertheless evoke 'laughter' (1972:8), that is, they evoke reactions similar to those which we experience reading not only the cited passage but the whole story *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*.

body,²⁰ but even become the object of Berg's obsessive admiration. In the end, it was only the main trunk of a body that was affected by the accident, while the legs – not brain, heart or yet some other part as the reader might expect – were chosen by both the narrator and the protagonist to stand as equivalent to a woman.

From the variety of prerequisites for the grotesque, which apply here, the most conspicuous is a part replacing and appropriating the role of the whole.²¹ Berg is completely satisfied with the legs as an object of his affection and no longer cares about Isolda:

Berg przesiadywał nad nimi całymi godzinami. Znałkażdy muskuł nazywał go po imieniu. Przesuwając ręką wzdłuż quadriceps cruris,²² pieścił lekko palcami wewnętrzna stronę uda, w tym miejscu, gdzie pachwinę łączy z kolanem wąski, ledwo dostrzegalny mięsień gracilis, znany także pod nazwą 'defensor virginitatis', najsłabszy z wszystkich mięśni nogi kobiecej. Cała jego holesna miłość do Izoldy skoncentrowała się teraz na jej nogach. Godzinami leżał teraz na kozetce, przytulony wargami do miękkiej, pachnącej skóry zaróżowionych ud, jak dawniej, kiedy pieścił je, gdy były jeszcze własnością tamtej. O samej Izoldzie myślał bardzo rzadko. Ścisłej biorąc, nie myślał wcale. Scena na klinice

²⁰ Jasieński's presentation of amputated legs, without any effects of decay, could have been prompted by Czyżewski's perfectly logical reasoning: 'What does not live does not exist, and what does not exist has neither form nor colour' (*Co nie żyje – nie istnieje, a co nie istnieje, nie ma ani formy, ani barwy*) from one of his publications included in *A Leaflet of Futurists* (1921). Seemingly following the same logic but putting Czyżewski's statement in a reverse order and in an affirmative mode Jasieński builds his own reasoning, revealing by this the fragile nature of all axioms: legs have colour and form, therefore they do exist, and if they do exist – they live.

²¹ Literary criticism knows such situations, where a part assumes the functions of the whole, as the synecdoche. Synecdoche, being a form of metaphor (M. Głowiński, *Zarys Teorii Literatury*. Warszawa 1967:118) creates favourable conditions for the device of the grotesque, especially when the image in question is a human body. With notable success Gogol used this device frequently: *Здесь вы встретите усы чудные [...]. Тысячи сортов шляпок, платьев, платков пестрых [...]. Здесь вы встретите такие талии, какие даже вам не снились никогда тоненькие [...]. А какие вы встретите дамские рукава на Невском проспекте! [...]. Здесь вы встретите улыбку единственную, улыбку верх искусства [...].* ('Here you meet marvellous moustaches [...]. Thousand kinds of hats, dresses, colourful kerchiefs [...]. Here you meet such thin waists, that you never dreamed of [...]. And what female sleeves you will see on Nevsky Avenue! [...] Here you meet the only smile, the state of art smile [...]') (Nevsky Prospekt, 1936:220-221).

²² The passage resembles certain expressionistic poems by Benn, who as a medical doctor by education indulged in detailed scientific renderings of protagonists', or rather their corpses', body parts (see Dierick 1992:9).

nie pozostawiła mu nic, oprócz uczucia obcości i obrzydzenia. Co go mogła właściwie obchodzić tamta oderwana połowa kobiety, bezkształtny kadłub, ohydny i tragiczny. Przytulony w słodkim wyczerpaniu do cudownych jej nóg, które teraz niepodziennie posiadał, czuł się zupełnie szczęśliwym. (1966:23)

Berg was spending hours with them. He knew their every muscle and called them by their names. He led his hand along the *quadriceps cruris*, with his fingers he tenderly stroked the inside of the thigh, in this place where the almost invisible muscle *gracilis* which is the weakest of all the muscles in a female leg, also known as '*defensor virginitatis*', joins her groin with a knee. All his painful love for Isolda focused now on her legs. For hours he was lying on his sofa, pressing his lips against the soft and fragrant skin of pinkish thighs, as before when he caressed them when they were still the property of that woman. About Isolda herself he thought very seldom, or to tell the truth, he did not think at all. The scene in hospital left him with nothing but the feeling of alienation and revulsion. What could he possibly have in common with that torn-off half of a woman, with this shapeless trunk, hideous and tragic? Embracing in sweet exhaustion her wonderful legs that were now his undivided possession, he was entirely happy.

The incident could be dismissed as merely dreadful incongruity, but the author presents it as a fact, simultaneously withholding any reference to the possible effects of amputation which should logically affect the legs. Such a situation can happen in the absurdity of the grotesque world where, as one critic has noted, 'assumptions do not hold true; premises never lead to expected conclusions and [...] the scientific laws of cause and effect are suspended' (Schoonover 1977:190).²³ The legs of Isolda enter the realm of the grotesque, because it is the only realm where they can thrive. The narrator's focus on their beauty confuses the reader who realises that the poor girl deserves sympathy after she suffered such a terrible tragedy. Instead, the ghastly reality of amputation is covered with silence while the vivid description of palpable characteristics and the anatomy of the amputated legs, even introduces an element of humour. Scientific terminology is in line with the Futurists' call to extend the literary vocabulary by including scientific terms – proof of this is in Jasieński's manifestos – but here we sense more than that: we sense the author's intention to show his intimate familiarity with female anatomy. The mention of *defensor virginitatis* comes as a direct mockery of female morals, for even without knowing Latin we decipher its meaning as 'the one which guards virginity' and we take it as a witty

²³ H. S. Schoonover, *The Humorous and Grotesque Elements in Doblin's 'Berlin Alexanderplatz.'* Berne, 1977.

comment which the author directs at his female acquaintances. By adding that it happens to be 'the weakest of all the muscles' – read 'ineffective' – he makes sure that readers get his point. And while the legs remain beautiful, 'the torn-off half' of Isolda is referred to as 'a shapeless and hideous trunk'. The readers confronted with this presentation of facts are confused because they realise how misplaced Berg's affection is. However, the further development of events fits Berg's frame of mind:

To, że nogi Izoldy po dwóch tygodniach były równie różowe i świeże, jak pierwszego dnia po operacji – było dla niego rzeczą zupełnie naturalną. Czegoś przeciwnego nie byłby nawet w stanie pomyśleć. Wydawałoby mu się to takim samym nonsensem, jak gdyby ktoś usiłował twierdzić, że Nike Fidiaszowej grozi rozkład, ponieważ brak jej głowy. (1966:23)

The fact that two weeks later the legs of Isolda were as pink and fresh as they were the first day after the operation was for him entirely normal. He would not even think that something else could have happened. It would be as nonsensical for him as if someone told him that the Nikē of Phidias²⁴ had begun to decay because she had no head.

Berg's reasoning is disturbing because it confuses human (Isolda) and material (statue) to the point of ludicrous but frightening absurdity, as was the case in some of the poems discussed earlier; *Vomiting Statues* for instance. The notion that a human body and the Nikē of Phidias belong to the same category and are subordinated to the same laws of nature, is born in Berg's mind as a result of his philosophy that a disjointed part 'still remains the organic part of the whole, forever joined with [it] by the unity of indissoluble essence' (1966:23).²⁵ Berg's pseudo-scientific reasoning is based on the false premise that essence is limited exclusively to the material sphere, thus the essence of a human being lies in flesh; the essence of a statue lies in stone, and the essence of the machine in metal. The reader is left without a tangible clue as to whether this concept of essence is acceptable to Jasieński, who maintained that 'Polish Futurism had taught contemporary man to see

²⁴ Phidias, a Greek sculptor (490-417 BC). Nikē – the goddess of victory, whose headless statue is attributed to Phidias.

²⁵ *Zresztą były to nogi kobiety żywej, oddzielone od reszty przez prosty przypadek, nie przestające przez to być nadal jej częścią organiczną, połączoną na zawsze z tą żywą jednością nirozerwalnej osobowości* (Jasieński 1966:23).

the beauty of his own enriched body in the material forms of civilisation' (1972:236-237), as it is to Berg. The reader may only guess – and hope – that the author of the story was not able to embrace the materialistic concept of man unquestionably.²⁶

The question of the essence of man seems to be central to the whole story. That is why it focuses on the body and on the machine, only to show that the world which builds itself on idolising what Jasieński called *przedmiotowe formy cywilizacji* 'material forms of civilisation' (ibid.:237) is doomed. The grotesque universe which the story creates by infusing the human with the mechanical serves as a mirror which reflects the crookedness and ugliness of a contemporary world which disregards the spiritual and emotional aspects of life in defining the essence of a human being. Jasieński is aware that it is not the intervention of machines into the life of people that introduced the question of human essence into the philosophical or literary discourse, for the previous generations of ages past were faced with the problem of resolving the nature of the human as opposed to the nature of the animal. However, he wanted his contemporaries to acknowledge the machine – a phenomenon of modernity – as ready to replace the animal compound in the former conceptualisation of the animated world. In *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, Jasieński makes this point by revoking the imagery used in the pre-machine age, and re-arranging its components in such a way that they create new images befitting the modern machine age. As a result, as Kayser put it, 'the mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it' (1981:183). The characters of the story are thus grotesque hybrids, a cross-species composed of human, animal and mechanical parts. We may begin with Isolda:

²⁶ It does not mean that he was inclined to lean towards Expressionists (compare the views of Kolesnikoff 1982:85). Expressionism was unacceptable to Jasieński because, to the Futuristic 'tyranny of technology', it responded with the *tyranny of spirit*, to paraphrase Stern (1969:211). Jasieński must have felt that there must be an approach 'in between' the two opposing views of the world, an approach called today 'holistic', but he was not able to express this wholeness of being in his works.

Dziewczyna miała lat dwadzieścia trzy, duże kasztanowe włosy rozsypane w nieładzie, twarz nieskazitelnie piękną i smukłą, cudowne nogi, sięgające w biodrach nieomal wysokości piersi – nieomylny talizman kobiet rasowych. (1966:16)

The girl was twenty-three, she had a mass of disorderly auburn hair and a face of unblemished beauty, she had slender, marvellous legs reaching almost to her breasts – an infallible talisman of thoroughbred women.

This quotation basically exhausts the portrayal²⁷ of the title heroine in the story: in such a way we could describe a doll, but not a woman. The emphasis is clearly on those qualities of the body which make it sexually attractive, but the description says nothing of Isolda as a human being. Her categorisation in terms of ‘pedigree’²⁸ brings to our attention her market value, as might be the case with an animal, which after all she might be. Looking at her lying in the hospital bed, Berg notes her eyes as being like those of a tortured dog (20), while in the description of her legs the narrator mentions *pęciny*, ‘fetlocks’, instead of *kostki*, ‘ankles’. The emphasis on the animalistic qualities in Isolda further emphasises Berg’s fascination with her body.²⁹ Awkward in itself is the elaborate description of Isolda’s amputated legs, incomparably more detailed than that of Isolda herself:

Były to nogi wyzywająco białe i przedziwnie długie. Zakorzczone maleńką, wąską stopą, dostatecznie wysmukłe w pęcinach, wybuchały w nieskazitelnie modelowane podudzie, bardzo wysokie, twarde i jędrne. Od drobnych maleńkich kolan udo białe, o aksamitnym połysku, pokryte było całe siecią ledwie dostrzegalnych niebieskich żyłek, nadających kobiecemu ciału powagę marmuru. Drobne stopy tonęły jeszcze w płytkich, lakierowanych pantofelkach, a czarne, jedwabne pończochy okalały je powyżej kolan, podobnie jak w momencie, kiedy jeszcze unosiły swoją właścicielkę. (1966: 22-23)

²⁷ In view of Foster’s definition, such a portrayal is grotesque as it is ‘based upon a minor feature exaggerated all out of proportion’ (1966:76).

²⁸ It can also mean ‘racial’, the meaning which comes to fore in one of Jasieński’s later works, the short story *The Nose*, where the shape and the size of the protagonist’s nose came to signify his value as a member of society.

²⁹ Nadia Khouri in her article *The Grotesque: Archeology of an Anti-Code*, speaking about the significance of images conflated of the human and the animal, notes that ‘the animal remains the material principle in which man recognises his subrational desecration and his attachment to his body’ (1980:20).

The legs were provocatively white and strangely long.³⁰ Ending with a small, narrow, highly arched foot, rather slender at the fetlocks, they exploded into the immaculately modelled calf, very long, hard and firm. From small knees the white thigh, velvety in sheen, was covered with a net of almost invisible delicate blue veins, which bestowed on a female body the dignity of marble. Tiny feet were still immersed in shallow lacquered shoes, while black stockings embraced [the thigh] just above the knee, in the way they did when they still were carrying their proprietress.

The profoundly lyrical tonality and poetic atmosphere in the passage quoted befits the portrayal of expanses of some modernist landscape rather than the portrayal of Isolda's severed legs, and as such it is incompatible with its gruesome subject matter. Each such entry makes Isolda less and less human. It makes her a beautiful plaything and a hurt animal, a decadent *femme fatale* who – even if unwillingly – is the reason for her lover's demise. It even may imply that she possesses supernatural powers: her legs are persistently qualified as *cudowne*, 'marvellous'³¹ and she reappears in a tram waving at Berg with her handkerchief after she has poisoned herself with sulphuric acid. Her name signifies esoteric romantic love³² but in fact she is only an object of bodily lust. To the reader she appears all these put together, but not a human being. There is too much of the incongruous and unfamiliar about her for the reader to feel sorry for her.

Berg belongs to the same category of grotesque figures as Isolda, although his animalistic side emerges only when he is struck by extreme terror. Otherwise he acts like a robot, for he is a manlike machine. The most revealing in this respect is his reaction to Isolda's accident:

³⁰ Such switch of adjectives is a grotesque tease, for under the circumstances one would rather expect 'strangely white and provocatively long'.

³¹ *Cudowny* is an adjective derived from *cud* 'miracle'; it means both marvellous and able to perform miracles. The ability of Isolda's legs to prosper by themselves is *sui generis* a miracle. Her foreign surname *Morgan* (in Polish surnames usually have gender forms) may either be 'the surname of a banker' (Dziarnowska 1982:90), or rather, as suggested to me by Professor Sherman, an allusion to Morgan le Fay - a beautiful sorceress and sister of the legendary King Arthur, the hero of the British Romantic *Idylls of the King* by Tennyson, which Jasieński might have read if not in the original then in Polish translation.

³² As in Wagner's Romantic opera of *Tristan and Isolde*. Jasieński mocks the Romantic heroine by emphasising her physical and erotic nature.

Berg stanął u nog. Przygotowany był, że trzeba będzie coś powiedzieć, ale w tej chwili nie mógł sobie właściwie przypomnieć nic odpowiedniego.

(...ciężkie, puszyste świece kasztanów w długiej, bezwzględnie prostej perspektywie, chłodny, wilgotny smak ust opartych o usta, ciepło drobnej ręki odczuwanej przez zamsz rękawiczki... pamiętasz?...)

Spróbował się nawet usmiechnąć, ale oczy jego padły w tej chwili na obwistą linię kołdry, modulującą niepojętą próżnię poniżej bioder.

(...Boże, Boże tylko nie myśleć...)

Jakaś lepka, słodka ciecz podeszła mu do krtani.

I znów kasztany, i znów smak wilgotnych ust, i długa, wąska nogą, wynurzająca się z słonecznej piany sukienek.

(...ćssśicho, przecież nie będę krzyczał...)

Jaką zabawną minę ma doktor. Lewy wąs mu opada, jak u chrząszcza, a na końcu nosa malutki pryszcz.

I wtedy spotkał jej oczy, oczy wylękłego, skatowanego psa (...u ojca, na podwórzu – potopili mu szczenięta...), jakby żebrające o litość, wpatrzone w niego z naprężonym wyczekiwaniem.

Poczuł, że pod tym wzrokiem mieszka się, że rumieni się jak sztubak, że stoi tu już parę minut, że trzeba nareszcie coś powiedzieć i że on przecież nic nie powie.

I nagle zachciało mu się uciec.

(...na ulicy ludzie, dorożki, turkot, tramwaje, trrr...)

Dlaczego ten doktor ma taką dziwną minę? O, tu jest klamka, teraz tylko do siebie.
(1966:20, emphasis in original)

Berg stood at her bedside. He knew that he would have to say something, but at this moment he actually could not remember anything suitable.

(... the heavy, fluffy candles of chestnut trees in a long, unconditionally straight perspective, cool, sultry taste of lips leaning on lips, the warmth of a small hand felt through the chamois of a glove... remember?...)³³

He even tried to smile, but at this very moment his eyes rested on the drooping line of the duvet, a modulating incomprehensible void below her hips.

(...God, God, only not to think...)

Some sticky, sweet fluid rose to his larynx.

And again chestnut trees, and again taste of sultry lips, and a long, narrow foot, appearing from the sunny froth of the dress.

(shhhha, well, I cannot yell...)

What a funny face the doctor has. His left moustache is dropping like that of a beetle, and at the tip of his nose there is a pimple.

At this point he met her eyes, the eyes of a terrified, tortured dog (...at his father, in the yard – they drowned its puppies...), as if begging for mercy, looking at him with an intense expectation.

He felt that her sight confused him, that he blushed like a school-boy, that he was already standing there for couple of minutes, that he had to say something eventually, and that after all he would not say a word.

³³ The punctuation follows the original; commas instead of full stops emphasise the flow of thought which disregards syntactic or grammatical order.

Suddenly he wanted to run away.
 (...there are people on the street, street-cars, a rumble, trams, trrr...)
 Why has this doctor such a strange face? Oh, there is a door handle, now only to get home.

Berg's chaotic thoughts expose his spiritual emptiness and his attachment to the external, physical aspects of life. From our humane point of view, he has denied Isolda the most obvious comforts in her tragedy, namely love and compassion. At this point Berg seems to be the embodiment of Futuristic ideals, and if so, of Jasieński's own views. Jasieński wrote that 'art is neither a mirror nor the anatomy of the soul' (1972:214). In his view modern man has overcome sentiments; in his manifestos he declared 'the erotic moment to be one of the basic functions of life in general' (*ibid.*:206), and he rejected 'the romantic sadness of roses and nightingales' (*ibid.*:215). Berg's relationship with Isolda is limited to the body, that is to sex, and since legs symbolise female sexuality,³⁴ it fits into the materialistic conceptualisation of man, which Jasieński, as a Futurist, supported. On the other hand we are not certain whether or not Berg is a parody of Jasieński's Futuristic ideals, and therefore a parody of himself personally. The profoundly ironic fact that Berg is defeated by the monsters he himself created makes us think that love and compassion would save him from the onslaught of machines.³⁵ But to say it openly, Jasieński would have to admit the existence of a world which is not perceptible to our senses. However, using the grotesque, he could imply it, for 'the intensity of grotesque irony lies in the absence of a fixed point of view. [...] In the grotesque no one can come away sure of what was said in earnest and what was said in jest, for both perspectives are valid' (Muller Cooke 1982:327).

The automaton-like qualities of Berg become even more apparent through the description of the sexual encounter he has with an unknown girl – presumably a prostitute, since

³⁴ In the European cultural code a nose is said to embody masculinity. By analogy, legs symbolise female sexuality, as for instance in the case in Brecht's early poetry. Jasieński consciously alludes to this code by taking a line from Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* as the second motto: *Ach, i cóž to za nóżka! Nóżka troszkę spuchnięta* ('And, what a leg! Leg a bit swollen').

³⁵ Lubelski speaks generally of *wartości ludzkie*, 'human values' (see 1973:73).

money was involved. They meet, they do not speak, he just follows her to her lodging. In her small but tidy room he only notices her body, her breasts and well shaped hips. Then:

Przypominał sobie, że od dwóch miesięcy nie miał żadnej kobiety. Wziął ją łapczywie, tak jak ludzie biorą chleb w czasie głodu. Biodra miała miękkie i elastyczne, jak sprężynowe, podnosili się i opadały rytmicznie, tak że można było pozostawać nieruchomym, a akt odbywał się sam przez siebie. (1966:34)

He remembered that he had not been with a woman for two months. He took her greedily as people take bread during the famine. Her hips were soft and resilient, as if made of springs; they were bouncing up and down rhythmically, in such a way that he could stay motionless and the act was taking place by itself.

A moment before he had witnessed a similar act performed by the machine:

Za chwilę przyciąga jego uwagę ogromny tłok wznoszący się i opadający z jednostajną dokładnością. Wydobywa się z niego głuche, zmęczone sapanie. Bergowi przychodzi na myśl akt płciowy. Przypatruje się prawie z przerażeniem, jak olbrzymi tłok spada i podnosi się niezmordowanie. Maszyna spółkuje. – Dlaczego one jednak same się nie rozmnażają – mówi Berg i czuje zimne mrowie wzdułu kręgosłupa. – Dzikie, bezpłodne zwierzęta – rzuca Berg nie oglądając się za siebie i przyśpiesza kroku. (1966:24)

Then his attention is drawn to an enormous piston which lifts itself up and with monotonous accuracy comes down. Heavy breathing, dull and tired, emanates from it. It reminds Berg of a sexual act. Almost terrified, he looks as the giant piston falls down and lifts itself unflaggingly. The machine copulates. – Why they do not procreate by themselves? – says Berg and eerie chills creep along his spine. – Savage, barren beasts – Berg throws at them without looking, and quickens his step.

In the description of both sexual encounters, we observe the device of ‘cross-reference’: It is not only that the girl’s body is ‘as if made of springs’ but it is also the mechanical, rhythmic, up-and-down emotionless motion, a routine rather than a meaningful, passionate experience.

Berg is one of the first in Jasieński’s gallery of grotesque images of dummies, automaton-like bodily shells resembling human beings only by shape and functions, but essentially not human. Berg has lost the ability to commiserate with Isolda in her tragedy and the capacity

to show her his love.³⁶ His grotesque origins make us ambivalently unresponsive to his own misfortunes, for unlike Isolda who was deprived of her human qualities by others – her lover and the narrator – Berg forfeits his own human qualities on his own account, because of his pseudo-logic. That is why despite an atmosphere of tragedy and horror, at the end of the story he enters the realm of slapstick comedy: when he holds desperately on to an over-hanging street lamp in order to save himself from a tram wanting to kill him, he evokes laughter rather than tears. While the portrayal of Isolda was not tragic enough to arouse our sympathy, in the case of Berg we doubt whether he has earned our pity because there is nothing in him with which we can identify.

Other characters in the story are machines presented as ludicrous monsters. Machines are especially open to grotesque portrayal ‘because of their activity and energy which, although non-organic, recall and above all exceed human organic activity and energy. But machines do not only exceed human power, they especially do so arbitrarily and inflexibly, unhampered by socio-ethical laws’ (Khouri 1980:21). Berg’s interaction with machines is a modern version of the relationship primeval man held with nature. Jasieński touches upon this issue briefly in his summary of Polish Futurism:

Człowiek pierwotny ubóstwiał żywioły, ponieważ uczuwał wobec niego swą całkowitą bezbronność. Na dalszym szczeblu stosunek ten zamienił się na stosunek buntu do zdetronizowanego niewiadomego [...] (1972:226)

Primeval man worshipped elements because he felt his total helplessness in relation to them. On higher levels [of development] this attitude changed into one of rebellion towards the degraded unknown [forces] [...]

The story does not directly expose Berg’s ‘worship’ of machines, except by imparting the information that he was an engineer, but rather implies it by revealing his worship of legs,

³⁶ Jasieński is obviously trying to determine the meaning of love, which for him is a spiritual event, and sex which, in the end, is a function of the body. In his poetry, prose, and in his play *The Ball of the Mannequins*, Jasieński portrays lust and sex as the main motivations which animate his protagonists. References to love are almost absent in his works. In the 1972 collection of Jasieński’s poems, there is only one poem, *Tango Jesienne (The Autumn Tango)* dedicated to the mysterious Z. K. which is lyrical enough to fit the category of love poems (see 1972:23-24).

that is the body. But his consciousness must still be in transition from primeval to modern, because machines appear to him as malevolent beasts. He feels trapped, he feels he is losing control:

[...] *Strach duszony w głębi skrada się i zgładza mu w oczy.*

– *Trzeba to przemyśleć, przemyśleć – powtarza Berg i jednocześnie czuje, że właściwie na wszystko już jest za niego z góry przemyślane. Wyjścia nie ma. [...]*

Berg czuje się nagle osaczonym. Wszystkie maszyny, oglądane kiedykolwiek, wypełzają z zakrętów świadomości i otaczają go żelaznym pierścieniem. (1966:26-27)

[...] Fear suppressed inside creeps out and looks into his eyes.

– I need to think it through, to think it through – repeats Berg and at the same time he feels that actually everything had already been thought through for him. There is no way out. [...]

Berg feels suddenly beset. All the machines he ever saw now crawl out of all the corners of his consciousness and surround him with an iron ring.

The more Berg thinks of the problem the more intense it becomes and he comes close to losing his mind. Everything which has anything to do with machines has the ability to ‘suddenly’ assume grotesque qualities – even a smile turns to be a horrifying grotesque grin:

Nadchodzi tramwaj. Na widok jego Berg wzdryga się. Chce mu się krzyczeć. Patrzy w twarz pasażera z prawej strony. Jest dobrodusza, spokojna i zadowolona, jak maska. Nagle pod naporem wzroku maska pęka na dwoje potworną szczerą uśmiech i Berg widzi na chwilę czerwoną, otwartą paszczę szaleństwa o kilka centymetrów od swojej twarzy. (1966:27)

A tram comes. Upon seeing it Berg shudders. He feels like screaming. He looks into the face of a passenger on the right. It is kind, tranquil and content, like a mask. Suddenly under the pressure of his sight the mask breaks in half in a horrific crevice of a smile, and just a few inches from his face Berg sees a red wide-open muzzle of madness.

Here Berg’s terror reaches its climax and is expressed through an incongruous, grotesque image of a face-mask³⁷ breaking in half in a smile. A token of friendship is taken as a sign of madness. Although the grotesque character of *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* relies chiefly

³⁷ Kayser considers images of ‘faces frozen into masks [and masks taking] over the role of the faces itself’ typical of the grotesque (1981:183-184).

on grotesque imagery to strengthen the effect in this case, the author reaches for the verbal grotesque, putting into one odd semantic cluster the adjective 'horrific' and the noun 'smile'.

Looking for the sources of his predicament in the external world instead of trying to find it within himself, Berg feels that he has to destroy machines. The world around him becomes enchanted, similar to the one in a fairy tale – 'the black void looks now even darker' and 'the eyes of manometers become strange and mesmerising' – but instead of some outlandish overgrown seven-headed dragons, he is facing machines: 'enormous contours of wheels appear in front of him like black wings of giants' and 'in the bright light of his torch, the eyes of manometers glow like two brutish lanterns'³⁸ (28). A number of entries which rely on the passive voice and other syntactic structures with impersonal effect, such as: 'everything was thought out for him' (26), 'someone's hand lifted him up', 'a powerful bony hand leads him, carrying him over the factory hall' (25), indicate the possibility of supernatural intervention, but should be read rather as an irony which emphasises the arrogance of Berg, an engineer by profession,³⁹ in his relentless belief in logic which leaves no space for the spiritual and illogical spheres of existence. For Berg this is the end of the road, but the author is not certain whether his own views on the machine do not spell a dead end for him as well, for he manipulates Berg's speech in such a way that the reader is not able to determine unequivocally whether certain opinions belong to Berg, to the narrator, or to the author himself, or whether they are shared by all three of them. Such is the case in the fragment quoted below:

³⁸ The Polish *słepia*, as in the original, is used only in reference to animals.

³⁹ This is one of the motivations for making Berg an engineer. There are some other implications of Berg's profession, but these are not developed in the story. For instance, Berg as an *inteligent* – in Polish applies the same concept of *intelligentsya* as in Russian, namely it refers to all educated people – stands high in the social class structure. Berg himself is confused, which is made clear in his speech during the meeting (1966:29-31) and his final refusal to join with the masses. His social uncertainty is paralleled by his uncertainty about who is he in relation to machines: an oppressor (as an engineer), or a victim (as a human being). At one point he realises that machines hate him and that theirs' is 'the primordial hatred of a worker towards his exploiter' (*ibid.*:24). Later he feels that he himself – a human being – is oppressed by machines.

Zbliżamy się do końca z matematyczną dokładnością. Wkrótce wszystko dookoła nas zastąpią maszyny. Będziemy się poruszali wśród maszyn. Każdy nasz ruch czynimy zależnym od maszyny. Oddajemy broń. Zdajemy się w ręce obcego, wrogiego nam żywiołu. [...] Na razie nikt tego nie widzi, nie rozumie. Jesteśmy zaślepieni swoją mocą. Wyjścia nie ma. [...] Bronić się nie można. [...] Trucizna jest w nas samych. Zatruliśmy się własną mocą. Lues cywilizacji. (1966: 31-32)

We are coming to the end with mathematical exactitude. Soon machines will replace everything around us. We will move among the machines. Every one of our actions will depend on the machine. We are giving up our weapons. We are giving ourselves into the hand of hostile foreign elements. [...] At present nobody notices it, nobody understands. We are blinded by our power. There is no way out. [...] It is impossible to fight back. [...] The poison is in ourselves. We have poisoned ourselves with our own power. Lues of civilisation.

Always precise in using typographical signs to guide the reader through his text, at the beginning of this paragraph Jasieński omits a hyphen to indicate that the text will convey the words of Berg, although the paragraph evidently seems to convey Berg's words directed to a worker. The omission is deliberate as the paragraph ends with 'Lues of civilisation' – a phrase which belongs to Jasieński and figures in *To the Polish Nation. Manifesto on the Immediate Futurisation of Life* (1972:207).

Jasieński used the machine-beast analogy for the first time in *The City*, portraying the ambulance as a monster 'sniffing for tragedy' (1972:67). In *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* the concept of machines as hostile, conniving monsters is developed by the verbs *czychać*, 'ambush', *czaić się*, 'lie in waiting'. While these verbs evoke images of hunters: 'The animal lies in ambush' (*Zwierzę przyczaiło się i czyha* [1966:24]) and 'Now he sees that the machines lie in ambush everywhere' (*Teraz widzi, że maszyna czycha na niego wszędzie* (26]), the admission that Berg feels 'ambushed' (*osaczony* [26]) and that he feels 'small and helpless, surrounded by these iron beasts, left at their mercy' (*[/Berg] czuje się maleńkim i bezradnym w otoczeniu tych żelaznych istot, oddany im na pastwę* [1966:24]) shifts him to the category of their prey. In Berg's mind machines are 'iron creatures' while people, including himself, are reduced to helpless victims. The victim-oppressors binary extends to social conflicts. Jasieński senses the significance of the role machines may play

in the context of social condition⁴⁰ but cannot grasp it at this stage. In his speech, Berg alludes to the bourgeoisie and to exploitation as if parallelling social conditions to the machine-oppressor versus human-victim relationship, but this analogy degenerates into a grotesque logic *sui generis* for which Berg has already become known to the reader. Berg's speech echoes the apprehensions of nineteenth-century debates that machines would render the human work-force redundant, but it uses twentieth-century rhetoric loaded with fiery pseudo-ideological exclamations:

– *Nastąpił dzień zemsty. Świadomy swoich celów proletariat staje do walki. Żeby walka była owocna, trzeba przede wszystkim uswiadomić sobie, kto jest śmiertelnym wrogiem. Wystarczy tego wroga zniszczyć, a zło będzie usunięte. Takim wrogiem jest niewątpliwie burżuazja, ale nie jest to wróg zasadniczy. [...] Wróg jest inny, bliższy, z którym robotnik styka się codziennie przy pracy, który niepostrzeżenie pochłania jego siły, zdrowie a niekiedy i życie. Wrogiem tym jest maszyna. [...]*

Ale robotnik zawsze nienawidził maszyny. Od samego początku była ona dla niego nędzą i przeklęństwem. Dziesiątki tysięcy bezrobotnych, tysiące śmierci i okaleczeń, wdowy i sieroty bez chleba – oto czym jest dla robotnika maszyna. Teraz, gdy nastąpi czas walki otwartej i zwycięskiej, zadanie proletariatu leży tutaj: oswobodzić ludzkość od maszyny. Należy zniszczyć maszynę, zniszczyć natychmiast, jeżeli nie chcemy, żeby ona nas zniszczyła. (1966:29-30)

– The day of revenge came. Aware of its goals, the proletariat begins the struggle. In order to make this struggle fruitful, one must realize who the enemy is. The moment this enemy is destroyed, the evil will perish. Unquestionably the bourgeoisie is such an enemy, but it is not the foremost enemy. The enemy is different, closer, the one whom workers meet every day at their workplace, who unnoticeably consumes their strength, health, frequently even their life. This enemy is the machine. [...]

But workers always hated the machine. From the very beginning it meant poverty and damnation for them. Tens of thousands of jobless, thousands of deaths and injuries, widows and orphans without bread – this is what the machine is for workers. Now, when the time came for open and victorious confrontation, the rôle of the proletariat is to free humanity from the machine. The machine has to be destroyed, destroyed immediately, if we do not want her⁴¹ to destroy us.

⁴⁰ Stern is not entirely correct in saying that *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* ‘lacks any social accents’ (1969:210). There is actually an embryonic debate about whether machines are the allies of workers (student’s speech [1966:30]); also there is the issue of individual versus collective which is alluded to.

⁴¹ In Polish, ‘machine’ is of feminine gender.

The tone of this speech is as ludicrous as its subject matter is absurd. Ideological clichés sound familiar, especially because of their demagogic tonality which betrays an explicit intention to manipulate the powerful social force that workers became in the twentieth century. Berg despises workers, he even thinks they are less ‘intelligent’ than machines (31). He cannot stand any manifestations of humanity and actually he hates people as much as he hates machines. Telling in this respect is Berg’s reaction to the apparent happiness of a blue-eyed worker who once saved his life and who gains his strength from belonging to the collective:

*Caty pachnie, bije od nogo słone, radość moc: My! My!
Berg patrzy mu w twarz i bierze go szaloną ochotą wydrzeć mu tę jego radość i
zobaczyć w tych okrągłych oczach zwierzęce przerażenie. (1966:31)*

He is all fragrant, he shines with sun, happiness and power: We! We!
Berg looks into his face and is consumed by the desire to tear out this happiness and
to see in his round eyes the horror of an animal.

The novella’s universe maintains a definite semblance to ours by reference to workers, factories, elements of the familiar urban landscape, and even through references to social tensions but is made alien by its population consisting of creatures that, although possessing human bodies, function like automata, and others that are able to imitate human and perform some functions of the human body while actually being mechanical devices. Analysing certain aspects of the grotesque in this work we come to understand the distorted logic behind the organisation of the created universe, and the false premises on which its values rest. Although the presentation of machines as menacing omnipotent creatures results in powerful grotesque imagery in its own right, ‘filled with ominous tensions’, and as such typical of the literary grotesque (Kayser 1981:184], more important to us is the shadow these images cast on a portrayal of humans as cold mechanisms.

The novella *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* has been discussed here not for its artistic merits. The style of the story is uneven and sometimes pretentious, and even its author renounced it in the autobiography he wrote in the Soviet Union in 1931. It is doubtful that this quaint story will ever be reprinted. Yet it was necessary to include it in this examination of the

grotesque in Jasieński's works, firstly because it includes some conspicuous illustrations of modern grotesque imagery, secondly because in a mixture of wit and morbid vision it conveys the fears of a generation that suddenly realised that it stood on the threshold of the new era, and thirdly because the story attempts to capture the labour pains of what the author feared the new man might become, an emotionless 'material man'.

CHAPTER VI

I BURN PARIS AS THE GROTESQUE NOVEL

Wherefore thus saith the Lord God of Hosts, Because ye speak this word, behold, I will make my words in thy mouth fire, and this people wood, and this shall devour them.

(Jeremiah 5:14)

Jasieński's first novel *Palę Paryż* (*I Burn Paris*)¹ appeared in French² in 1926, initially serialised by *L'Humanité*, and subsequently published in book form by Flammarion. Its hero Pierre is a young proletarian who falls a victim to retrenchment, and loses his girlfriend Jeannette who prefers richer men. Pierre's physical hunger and jealousy melt in him into the overpowering feeling of hate towards all people. He decides to destroy the world which he finds demoralised and obsessed with money, and poisons the city's water conduit with the plague bacillus. As people die in their hundreds, Parisians blame one another for the epidemic and, in order to save themselves, they follow a separatist policy of joining into groups of common interest whether on the grounds of the same nationality, religion, race or political views. The critical situation of the city facing the deadly disease permits the author to expose the wickedness of human nature, characterised as it is by pettiness, greed, nationalism, racism, and ideological and religious fanaticism, all of which is intended to justify Pierre's retaliation. But death remains indifferent to these divisions, reaping a substantial harvest. In the end, only a handful of prisoners survive – the novel's

¹ In this chapter, reference is made to the 1957 Warsaw edition (based on the earlier Polish publication (Warszawa: Rój, 1929), with the introduction by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski) put out by the Publishing Cooperative: Czytelnik, with an introduction by Anatol Stern. In this chapter, all quotations from this source are indicated by the page number only.

² It was published as *Je brûle Paris*, in serial form in *L'Humanité*, between 14 September and 13 November 1928. It is believed that the novel was written in response to Paul Morand's essay-lampoon, *Je Brûle Moscou*, in *Demain*, April 1925, where Morand explicitly ridiculed Communist Russia, especially Mayakovsky and his relationship with Briks. See Jangfieldt 1991: 132, 233, and Kolesnikoff 1982:74-75.

'chosen', destined to establish a new world based on absolute equality. The 'comrade prisoners', as they are called by the narrator, gather the corpses of the dead and burn them, purging the world both literally and metaphorically of its past ills. The novel shares many features with Jasieński's poetry and *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*: it betrays the intention to shock the reader; its universe is morbid and bizarre, its dehumanised hero is lost in the deceptive labyrinths of life in the city. The incongruity of human existence in the metropolitan environment and the author's craftiness in disguising his own views add to the list of affinities.

The novel is composed of three parts, the first of which discredits the world, metaphorically represented by Paris, the second describes the complete destruction of this world, while the third is a mixture of the 'paradise' emerging from the ashes of the city, and the parallel portrayal of the spread of the epidemic to other French cities. The universe contrived in the novel is irreversibly corrupt, decadent and aesthetically revolting, so is its population. The emerging proletarian classes receive marginal attention and carry no transforming significance; they are faceless, uneducated brutes, represented by a few obscure heroes whose only passion is hatred. Their scant portrayal epitomises more the fears prevalent in some of the intelligentsia, evident earlier in Jasieński's own poetry,³ than hopes that their envisioned classless society will be able to solve the problems of injustice and oppression. The plot of the novel is astonishingly morbid and lacks the consistency of a literary epic: the main character, Pierre, dies halfway through. His actions are acknowledged by none of the other characters in the novel, while his motives are ambivalent and ludicrously insignificant, especially when juxtaposed to their monstrous consequences. Pierre is neither a hero nor a victim, just a pitifully mediocre creature, cruel and perhaps insane, who usurps the role of the redeemer of the unspecified oppressed masses.

Establishing the novel's main theme is difficult; it is neither the fate of an individual, nor the tragedy of the city, nor the triumph of justice. One of the aspects of the reality

³ I commented on this briefly in Chapter III.

contrived in the novel is the bizarre fragmentation of the world: thoughts are broken into 'beads of sentences' (17); the city is split into 'the beads of images' (27); a body resembles 'separate pieces of a chopped earthworm' (23); life goes on in the 'stuffy plant-pots of flats' (46); time is measured in 'drops-molecules' (33); movement is 'divided into atoms' (33). This sense of the disintegration of all aspects of life is captured by one of the characters: 'Paris, like a solution into which someone poured a strong reagent, was in the process of rapid decomposition into separate ingredients'.⁴ The absurd fragmentation of the city actually becomes the main theme of Part II, where Paris, plagued by the epidemic, breaks into isolated entities – states with their own governing bodies. Even a brief look at some aspects of the figurative language of the novel reveals that nothing may be taken for granted, nothing is what it seems to be: thoughts are 'like frightened away doves' (28), like 'entangled and winding streets' (31), while streets 'stretch into infinity like a rubber rope, tied to a leg, like a lizard jumping from under one's feet' (30) or are simply 'rivers of people' (40); 'words are like cobblestones' (47) while cobblestones are 'bald, scalped skulls' (18); a friendly voice is 'round and polished like a bullet' (56); the sky is 'an American flag with stars of stars' (44); the police have faces of dogs (16) or are 'navy-blue bats' (44) while prisoners are 'like beads in a rosary' (46).

Being Jasieński's 'most prominent prose work' (Lasota in Jasieński 1966:11), the novel was from the very beginning the subject of controversy. It has been condemned for its emphasis on eroticism and debauchery; it has been criticised for its focus on metaphysical and moral issues at the expense of revolutionary themes and the class struggle⁵ at the same

⁴ *Paryż jak roztwór, do którego ktoś wlał silny odczynnik, rozkładał się w oczach na odrębne składniki* (1957:192).

⁵ For instance, the article *Apokalipsa według Brunona Jasieńskiego* ('The Apocalypse according to Bruno Jasieński'), published in *Kultura Mas* 1930(4-5), maintained that *I Burn Paris* 'was intended as a revolutionary novel, but appeared as an apocalyptic book, very well suited to the bourgeoisie as a moralising warning against coming disasters'. Kolesnikoff attributes the article to Jan Wolski (1982:83) while in fact it was written by Jan Hempel (Wiślak). See also K. Jaworski 1995:150.

time being labelled as vulgar (Communist) propaganda.⁶ Dąbal, to whom Jasieński eventually dedicated *I Burn Paris*, in his recommendation of the novel to Barbusse, classified it as 'one of the few psychological literary works written in the spirit of historical materialism' (in Stern 1964:118). In a more recent criticism, Stern, for instance, considers *I Burn Paris* to be 'a fantastic novel uniting the two most important characteristics of social literature of those troubled times: catastrophism and hope for a miracle – in this case, the miracle of revolution'. Further he stated that the novel 'infects [zaraża] us with its anxiety and hatred of the world of the satiated and rich, and with the belief of the ultimate victory of the starved and deprived' (in Jasieński 1957:8). Rawiński focuses on the place of *I Burn Paris* in the tradition of catastrophist literature of the time, concluding that Jasieński's novel responded to a number of myths about dangers threatening modern civilisation (1968, Ch. III). Lubelski, on the other hand, believes that *I Burn Paris* is not a catastrophic novel but its antithesis, and that apocalyptic motifs play the rôle of 'a gesture towards the readers, a manoeuvre calculated at evoking in them violent reaction' (1973:85). Finally, without a clearly stated basis for her assessment, Kolesnikoff implies that *I Burn Paris* is a utopian novel.⁷ In this chapter, I set out to prove that there can hardly be a single category – whether that of genre, theme, nature, hero or style – that can define the essential nature of *I Burn Paris* more adequately than the category of the grotesque. But to assess the full scope and complexity of the grotesqueness of *I Burn Paris* is a daunting task, far exceeding the framework of this study. In order to prove my thesis that the novel is yet another of Jasieński's grotesque works, my survey of the grotesque in the novel will be limited to a brief analysis of the novel's content and form.

As Ludmila Foster notes in her essay aiming to elucidate the nature of the grotesque in a literary work, *A Configuration of the Non-Absolute*, the grotesque may affect both

⁶ A brief overview of criticism of the novel can be found in Stern's Introduction to *I Burn Paris* (1957:7); in Stern 1964:116-123; and in Dziarnowska 1982:241-244.

⁷ Chapter Five: 'I Burn Paris – A Utopian Novel' (1982:74-85). Kolesnikoff does not suggest why she considers the novel 'utopian'. She limits her study to a summary of its content with a brief survey of the possible literary genesis of the novel. Of interest to me was her brief analysis of some stylistic devices through which Jasieński 'defamiliarises' the world.

substance – that is, ““what is being told”” – and treatment – that is, ““how something is being told”” (1967:38). In the case of *I Burn Paris*, the grotesque can be detected both in its ‘substance’, as seen in the logic of the plot, the setting of the novel, its characters, their actions and motivations, among other features; and in its ‘treatment’, beginning with the figurative language, the unclear point of view, the unreliable narrator, the unstable narration, and the tone, which is frequently incompatible with what is being narrated. Various grotesque devices frequently overlap, concurrently affecting the essence of the novel and its presentation, and creating a final impression of unbearable incongruity; unbearable because the narrative is structured on absurd notions that aggressively attack our own understanding of life. The novel prophetically – that is, far ahead of time – explores one of the most abhorrent pathologies of our twentieth-century history – a phenomenon of mass murder, trying to establish reasons that might possibly justify the genocide. The ‘substance’ and its ‘treatment’ in *I Burn Paris* are tightly interconnected: the weird plot, based on flawed logic and a distorted image of the world, depends on a peculiar manner of expression, involving various figurative devices. For practical reasons, in this chapter, some of the formal aspects of the grotesque in the novel will be discussed first, followed by an analysis of the plot, its structure, and the nature of the narrator and hero, the setting, the imagery, and ending in a brief summary of the destabilising effect of the grotesque on the novel’s character which ultimately thwarts any attempt to assess its nature unequivocally.

One of the conspicuous characteristics of *I Burn Paris* is its peculiar style, a constant tussle between concise statements⁸ and syntactically elaborate sentences of which most of the fragments quoted in this chapter are composed. However, it is not the syntactic complexity which makes Jasieński’s style grotesquely ambiguous but rather its saturation with figurative devices, the lumping together of similes, comparisons, hyperboles, metonymies and metaphors to the extent that the reader loses track of the logical

⁸ As seen in the following, randomly chosen examples: *Pierre podszedł bliżej*. (‘Pierre came closer.’); *Pierre usunął się nieśmiało na trotuar. Ktoś ujął go za ramię. Obejrzał się*. (‘Pierre shyly stepped down on the pavement. Someone grabbed his shoulder. He looked back.’); *Świtało*. (‘The sun was rising.’) (1957:28-29).

coherence between the words in a sentence. Outlining the character of *I Burn Paris*, Stern notes that its style is ‘full of metaphors and ornaments’, firstly because it forms a bridge between Jasieński’s poetry and his prose, and secondly because such was the style of the epoch, for which even a jocular term, ‘metaphoritis’, was coined (1969:145-146). Finding some metaphors used by Jasieński artificial, Rawiński, for instance, qualifies the artistic devices in *I Burn Paris* as ‘pretentious’ and ‘cheap secessionist effects’, though he considers these ‘stylistic borrowings from Modernism’ balanced by the ideological content of the images created with their help (1968, Ch. III:37). In his cautious approval of Jasieński’s method, Stern shows better understanding of the function performed by figurative language in *I Burn Paris*. In his view, Jasieński ‘uses and even abuses’ artistic devices aiming to ‘de-automatise and estrange the universe’ created in the novel (1969:146).

Considering the saturation of the narrative with various artistic devices, even if we have to accept that the style of *I Burn Paris* is, indeed, partially affected by ‘the fashion of the epoch’, there is sufficient evidence that Jasieński carefully calculated most of his figurative expressions, devising for them a number of functions. One of the most important functions of these artistic devices is to render the world strange and different in comparison to the one perceived by the reader. In the realistic style, figurative devices such as comparisons or similes or even metaphors are used to make the text more lucid, to explain abstract concepts by tangible and familiar images. This seldom applies in grotesque literature. Thus, almost as a rule, the figurative devices in *I Burn Paris* confuse rather than illuminate whatever concepts or images they are meant to qualify. The initially straightforward devices such as simile or comparison grow out of their communicative function to the point that they become grammatically ambiguous and logically ambivalent, as in the case of a comparison, meant to record the state of Pierre’s mind:

[...] Niejasne, gorączkowe myśli, jak spłoszone gołębie, odleciały go nagle, zostawiając zupełnie próżnię i łopot skrzydeł w skroniach. (1957:28)

[...] Blurry, feverish thoughts, like pigeons flew away suddenly in a flutter, leaving behind a complete emptiness and the flapping of wings in his temples.⁹

This simile, linking the thoughts of a man with the pigeons frightened away, might be accepted – perhaps with some reservation – as a realistic device. However, the mention of ‘the flapping of wings in his temples’ creates a tension between the figurative and the literal meaning of the whole sentence, rendering the simile ambiguous and thwarting its communicative value, making it grotesquely incongruous. This is similar to the incident of Pierre being accosted by a policeman while standing on the street, not knowing what to do with himself after having been thrown out of work. The policeman, who represents the hostile world, is rendered grotesque by a metaphor which emphatically conveys Pierre’s feelings towards this world:

[...] *Thustego granatowy policjant o twarzy buldoga, z wyczyszczonym numerkiem na obroży, warknął mu nad uchem, że zatrzymywacisie w tym miejscu nie wolno.* (1957:16)

[...] A fat navy-blue¹⁰ policeman with the face of a bulldog, with a polished number-[plate] on a dog-collar, growled over his ear that he is not allowed to stand in this place.

Although the first part of the expression (‘a fat navy-blue policeman with the face of a bulldog’) is ambiguous – there is no indication of whether we are meant to take the confusion of human and animal literally or as a metaphor – its grotesqueness may be disputed; the image evoked strikes us rather as a caricature of a fat policeman who resembles a bulldog. But the narrator’s earnest pursuit of the explicit grotesque, leads him to elaborate here on the policeman’s animalistic features (dog-collar, growled) to the point

⁹ Providing relevant citations, Kolesnikoff finds that Jasieński’s style resembles Hamsun’s description of hunger: ‘whenever I had been hungry for any length of time it was just as if my brain ran quite gently out of my head and left me with a vacuum’ or ‘I felt a scorching heat in my head, and something pulsated in my temples’ (see Kolesnikoff 1982:83). Refraining from contesting her theory, I take the opportunity to point out that Hamsun’s style is realistic and unequivocal as opposed to Jasieński’s, which clearly is grotesquely ambiguous.

¹⁰ Here ‘navy-blue’ – the colour of the uniforms of the French police. In the interwar Poland the police were also identified by the colour of their navy-blue uniforms, stigmatised as a symbol of oppression.

that he enters the realm of the grotesque; the figurative meaning gradually vanishes, and the literal remains: the policeman ultimately appears to be a dog in the same way as in the former example the impression was conveyed that not thoughts but real pigeons flew away from the character's mind. Sometimes this effect of absurdity does not manifest itself within a sentence but within a paragraph:

Z bramy sąsiedniego pałacyku wychyliła się głowa starszego, siwawego mężczyzny. Zgryźliwa, zła głowa. Głowa powiedziała głośno łamaną angielszczyzną [...]. (1957:277)

From a door of the neighbouring mansion appeared the head of an old greying man. The peevish, evil head. The head spoke loudly in a broken English [...].

The reader's sense of language is taken by surprise: the first sentence may be figurative, but the following two convince the reader that his initial impression was wrong. The metaphor is rendered literally by the narrator and the image which it creates is grotesque. The part of the body acts on its own, the possibility of a joke is rebuffed by the head's evil look, and, as we learn later, it informs a man of the death of his lover.

The metaphors in the novel are profoundly ambivalent; they confuse the narrative's perspective, so to speak. Frequently they are composed in such a way that they may be interpreted as referring both to the inner experience of the various personages and to the state of affairs in the outside world, never allowing the reader to reach a conclusive definition of this perspective. For instance, in a fragment which conveys the early hours in the city, the deeply distressed Pierre waits for his beloved Jeannette in front of her house. She has not returned home for the night.

Gdzieś daleko, na jakiejś niewidzialnej wieży, zegar wydzwonił drugą. Wolno, jak chłopcy w szkole – wyuczoną na pamięć lekcję, powtarzały ją za nim nad pulpitami dachów inne wieże. Potem znowu cisza. Ciężkie powieki, jak muchy pojmane na lep, trzepocą niezgrabnie, na chwilę podfrunąły by znowu opaść. Gdzieś na dalekim wyboistym bruku zaturkotał pierwszy nieśmiały wóz. Wkrótce wyjadą wozy po śniecie. Nagi, chropawy bruk – łyse, oskalpowane czaszki żywcem zakopanego tłumu – spotkają je długim krzykiem-tłotem, podawanym z ust do ust przez nie kończącą się nigdzie długość wyobrażalnej ulicy. Trotuarami przebiegną czarni ludzie z długimi wólczniami, zanurzając ich ostrza w drgające jak płomyk serca latarni.

*Suchy jazgot obolałego żelaza. Senne, budzące się miasto podnosi z trudem
ociężałe powieki żaluzyj.*

Dzień

Jeannette nie wróciła. (1957:18)

Somewhere far, on some invisible tower, the clock struck two in the morning. Other towers, like schoolboys' well memorised lesson, repeat it slowly over the desks of roofs. Then again silence. Heavy eyelids, like flies caught on a fly-paper, flutter ungracefully, flying up and immediately falling back. Somewhere the first timid carriage rumbles on a distant pavement. The lorries will appear soon to collect waste. Naked, uneven cobblestones¹¹ – bald, scalped skulls of a crowd buried alive – will meet them with the prolonged scream-pounding that will be passed from mouth to mouth along this never-ending imaginary street. Along the pavements, black people will run with long spears, immersing their blades in the flickering like the glimmer heart of a street-lamp.

The dry clamour of an aching iron. Still sleepy, the awakening city lifts up with difficulty the ponderous eyelids of window shutters.

The day.

Jeannette did not return.

This extract illustrates the narrative slipping into an almost incomprehensible stream of images which may be born in the distraught mind of Pierre¹² but may also be taken as the portrayal of an oppressive city landscape. Earlier, the narrator reported that on receiving the news that Jeannette did not return home, all Pierre's thoughts disintegrated ('The news took him by surprise, in one blow scattering beads of sentences so labouriously strung already in his mind'¹³). The epithet 'invisible' is ambiguous and we do not know whether the tower cannot be seen because it is too far away, or whether it is invisible because it exists only in Pierre's imagination. The mention of 'responding towers' points to the physical existence of the tower in question while the epithet 'imaginary' qualifying the noun 'street' suggests that the landscape might exist only in the mind of the protagonist. Moreover, through carefully selected comparisons and similes ('eyelids like flies caught on a fly-paper', 'cobblestones – bald, scalped skulls of a crowd buried alive', 'heart of a street-lamp'), through personification implying that iron can experience pain and the city

¹¹ In original *bruk* which is a paved part of the street.

¹² A similar point is made by Stern (1969:50).

¹³ *Wiadomość ta zaskoczyła go znienacka, rozsypując jednym uderzeniem nawleczone już w myśl z takim mozołem paciorki zdani (1957:17).*

can open its eyes, through choice of words ('scream-pounding', 'black people'¹⁴) and images (spears immersed in a heart, never-ending street, the city opening up 'with difficulty the ponderous eyelids of window shutters'), the atmosphere of gloom and morbidity is introduced. This atmosphere is enhanced by the sounds of the city which, by implication, echo in the mind of the protagonist: the pounding of bells, clock-towers, the rumble of a 'timid carriage', 'scream-pounding' of wheels on a pavement and 'the dry clamour of an aching iron'. Ultimately, readers have to recognise that the object of portrayal in this passage is grotesquely vague, by which the distinction between the inner and outer worlds is no longer consequential – the fragment refers to a dreary morning in the city and at the same time to Pierre's despair, one being the grotesque metaphor of the other.

Another aspect of Jasieński's style, important for the grotesque, is its optic quality. It is difficult to understand exactly what Jasieński meant when he wrote in his manifesto on Futuristic poetry: 'Once and for all we finish with all the descriptions (painting) [...]' (1972:213; parentheses in original). It appears that quite the contrary is true, for in

¹⁴ Jasieński's uses the adjective 'black' frequently all examples from Jasieński 1972): 'black rogues', 'black city', 'black march', 'black crowd' (49); 'black people', 'black libraries' (50); 'black crowds', 'black houses' (58); 'black night' (62), and so forth. It seems that this adjective epitomises Jasieński's ambivalent attitude to reality, especially to people: 'Enormous black mass, terrifying and magnificent' (50); here the adjective may qualify workers, whom he admired, as in 'shouting of the rebellious black crew' (98), and the mob, whom he feared and loathed as in *The Song About Hunger*:

<i>ogromny tłum</i>	huge crowd
<i>z laskami,</i>	with walking sticks,
<i>czarny,</i>	black,
<i>jak powódź</i>	like a flood
<i>rośnie,</i>	grows,
<i>wije się za mną</i>	winds behind me
<i>długi,</i>	long,
<i>jak ogon.</i>	like a tail.
<i>zamknęli drzwi!</i>	they closed the door!
<i>za późno!</i>	too late!
<i>nie mam gdzie się schować!</i>	I have nowhere to hide!' [84].

Here the same ambivalence applies. Moreover, in Kolesnikoff's interpretation, 'black people' are 'savages [who] bury their spears in the hearts of lanterns' implying that the city is a 'jungle' (1982:81]. Considering that Jasieński was writing in images, it is possible to accept this description as almost a photographic reproduction of an image seen in a dim morning light where only indistinct outlines are visible.

Jasieński's poetry as well as in *I Burn Paris*, we see clear emphasis on the visual attributes in almost all metaphoric expressions, especially those which are grotesque. We have already noted in Jasieński's poetry the unprecedented visual appeal of his style. Even the most abstract concepts were given form, shape, dimensions, smell, colour, taste and the ability to act – that is, those factors which render them visible. Thus, language was a waterfall (1972:46), words could run and have a price (*ibid.*:46, 53), silence walked and peeped through the windows, sadness cried (*ibid.*:72), nerves could be played like violin strings (*ibid.*:47), music notes sat and yawned in bored, boredom was slippery and of cream colour (*ibid.*:6); in the poem *To Futurists*, wonders were bouncing, fear hung, poetry was diffused (*ibid.*:51-54). This situation can only happen in a grotesque universe that allows abstract and tangible to mingle freely. Moreover, ascribing abstract concepts with physical qualities allows them to become perceptible by the senses, it makes them 'visible' and allows them their grotesque existence.

At the very beginning of his seminal study, Bernard Mc Elroy makes it clear that 'As a phenomenon in art, the grotesque is physical, predominantly visual; its true home is in painting and sculpture [...]. In literature, it exists in precisely those works that use language to evoke for the reader a vivid visual image which is perceived as grotesque' (1989:ix). Such is the case in *I Burn Paris*, where Jasieński utilises this technique of 'visualisation' to the utmost: sentences are threaded like beads (17), the babble of his beloved is colourful confetti (20), a vacuum is audible like the sound of falling time (33), the day is a wall (25). Apart from the peculiar quality of Jasieński's method of expression, there is a direct indication that the narrator captures the world in images, some of which are already framed pictures; he simply communicates them, and by analogy commands the reader to receive the communicated text as a vision:

Paryż zwolna budził się ze snu. W rudych, spróchniałych framugach okien przygarbionych hotelików tu i ówdzie ukazywały się już profile starych, rozczochranych, na wpół gołych kobiet, majestatyczne w swoich wygnitych ramach jak widmowe portrety prababek tej bezpańskiej dzielnicy, gdzie prostytucja jest godnością dziedziczną, jak gdzie indziej tytuł rodowy lub stanowisko notariusza. (1957:25)

Paris was slowly waking up from its night sleep. In russet, mouldering window-frames of hunched little hotels, here and there appeared profiles of old dishevelled, semi-naked women, majestic in their rotten frames, like ghostly portraits of great-grandmothers in this derelict suburb where prostitution is a hereditary rank, as if it were the family name or the position of a public notary.

One of the first impressions conveyed by this framed vision is that of obscenity accepted as a commonplace landmark: dilapidated, dubious third-rate hotels, slovenly uncombed old prostitutes – half-naked semi-people (profiles) – with the grotesque jeer compared to the distinguished matrons and dignified by the frames in which they appear rather than by who they are. Here, as well as in all the material quoted in this chapter, the emphasis on the physical and the visual is constantly maintained, reminding the reader that the novel must not actually be read but visualised, for only then is the full impact of the grotesque achieved.

Almost literally painting the landscapes of Paris, whether supposedly real or admittedly appearing in the delusions or dreams of the characters, Jasieński writes as if playing with various techniques of painting. In the case of ‘waves of cars, leaving on the rocky shore of pavement white froth of ermine capes, swallow-tail mantles, necklines and shoulders’(40), we seem almost to recognise an Impressionist painting. Only looking closer do we notice that it does not have the subtlety and charm typical of the Impressionists; instead, a weird grotesque incompleteness oozes from the ‘painting’ – synecdoche, a compilation of fragmented bodies, pieces of attire scattered against the unfriendly stony background. The gruesome image of the pavement represented as bald, scalped human skulls in the earlier quotation descends almost directly from surrealistic imagery, while the full grotesqueness of the metaphor reaches us only when we simultaneously read and *visualise* it, as is the case with Pierre’s terrifying dream:

[...] *Z ziejącego przerębla ziemi, z otwartej paszczy metra, pieła się w góry nieskoronczona harmonijka ruchomych stopni. Jeden za drugim wyjeżdżały z hukiem coraz to nowe szczeble, zawalone pokotem obszarpanych, bezwładnych ciał. Wierzchołek schodów, na którym leżał Pierre, znajdował się już gdzieś wysoko w chmurach. [...]*

Z mrocznej czerwieni rozwarnej jezdni w rozdziawioną czerwienią nieba płynęły ruchome schody czarną ławą wynędziających śpiących ludzi. (1957:23-24)

From an abysmal air-hole in the earth, from an open muzzle of a metro, climbed an endless harmonica of a moving staircase. Ever new rungs were appearing one after another with a terrible rumble, swamped by the masses of ragged, lifeless bodies. The summit of the stairs on which Pierre was lying was already somewhere high in the clouds. [...]

From the dark abyss of a gaping street into the gaping abyss of the sky ran the moving staircase, laden with masses of emaciated sleeping people.

As noted in most of the quoted examples, here also several grotesque devices overlap, ending in the profoundly grotesque final image, bizarre and menacing. The vision of stairs laden with a human mass comes dangerously close to the picture of some monstrous conveyer belt feeding an equally monstrous mincing machine. The animated image of 'moving staircase' together with the gaping street and an open muzzle of a metro, form a contrasting background to motionless gaunt bodies of people, which completes the morbidly grotesque image.¹⁵

At the same time, ambivalence creeps in. The reader realises that the narrator's information might not be accurate. The vision of staircase, according to him, appeared in the hero's dream, but just a few paragraphs before, the narrator with equal confidence has related Pierre's supposedly real experience, which was equally quaint: 'from the tiled abyss of an underground railway' appear stairs where 'unshaved, ragged people, in eager haste, take their places on the steps close to the warm grating'. From that grating comes the 'stale, rotten warmth of gasping Paris's breath' and 'people in tatters [...] soon cover the whole staircase in their mass'. Pierre – 'too tired to drag himself any further' – takes 'an unoccupied spot at the top of the stairs, between two grey witches wrapped up in rags, greeting any newcomer with a hostile growling'. And there, amidst wet, slimy rags soaked with rain and fusty sweat, with his head on a 'pillow of a step covered with phlegm', Pierre 'was overcome with a heavy feverish drowsiness' (22-23).

The grotesque, as exemplified above, originates in the overpowering emphasis on the unsightly and repulsive characteristics of the world surrounding Pierre, while the mention

¹⁵ See Bakhtin: 'the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features [...]' (1984b:317-318).

of the witches emphasises the intimidating ugliness of the whole scene, simultaneously introducing the element of uncertainty as to how real this world actually is. The border between conscious and unconscious images is blurred to the point that they can be interchanged without any break in the narrative's communicative value. The aim of such 'imprecision' on the narrator's part is to show, without really saying it, that there is no escape from this oppressive universe, neither into a dream nor into hallucinations: this world will haunt you and hound you wherever you are and whatever you do. Thus the nature of life as presented in the novel is constantly balanced between illusion and reality; it is like its images – 'transcategorical hybrids [...], confused, unresolved, unstable and filled with great but uncertain significance' to use Harpham's words (1982:21):

Kontury przedmiotów zaostryły się jak oprowadzone ołówkiem, powietrze stało się rzadkie i przeźroczyste pod szklanym kloszem ssącej pompy miejskiego nieba. Domy stawały się rozciągliwe i przenikliwe, wciskały się niespodziewanie jeden w drugi, to znów wydłużały w nieprawdopodobnej, absurdalnej perspektywie. Ludzie nosili twarze zamazane i niejasne. Niektórzy mieli po dwa nosy, inni – po dwie pary oczu. Większość miała na karku po dwie głowy, jedna dziwacznie włożona w drugą. (1957:39)

The contours of objects became sharper as if encircled with a pencil, the air became thin and translucent under the glass dome of the pump[-like] city sky. Houses became stretchable and permeable, and to penetrate one another unexpectedly, to extend eventually into some improbable, absurd perspective. People wore blurred and unintelligible faces. Some had two noses, others – two pairs of eyes. The majority had two heads attached to the neck, one strangely forced into the other.

Taken as one image, the portrait of the city is immediately recognisable as grotesque – strange double-nosed, double-headed creatures which the narrator calls 'people', expandable, ghostly houses; the atmosphere ominous and the images ludicrous. While outlines of objects are distinctly clear, faces are blurred and indistinct. The feeling of being trapped is introduced through the device of reducing the universe to the size of a pump. The narrator's hint that the vision is born in the starved Pierre's mind should be accepted with reservation. Just a few paragraphs later, the narrator reports the conversation Pierre has had with one of his acquaintances. Etienne explains to Pierre how to earn money pandering teenage girls as prostitutes to older men. The conversation ends with the conclusion that in order to look real one has to create a 'full illusion':

[...] *Twarz pewny. Trzeba tylko umieć to podać w odpowiednim sosie. Przedstawić: krótką sukieneczka, fartuszek, warkoczyk z kokardą. Na górze pokoiki – szkolka: święty obrazek, lózeczko z siatką, pulpik szkolny, tablica, na tablicy – kreda: 2x2=5. Pełna iluzja. Żaden starszy pan się nie oprze.* (1957:41)

[...] The goods are reliable. One just has to know how to present them and serve with the right gravy. To introduce: short dress, school uniform, pig-tail with a ribbon. Upstairs rooms – the little school: a holy icon on the wall, little bed, school desk, blackboard, and on the blackboard – in chalk: $2 \times 2 = 5$. A full illusion. No older man will be able to resist it.

The reality portrayed in the novel constantly veers between the real and the illusory, and this greatly enhances the grotesque nature of *I Burn Paris*. The question of the nature of the novel's universe is important, especially in view of Stern's assessment of its character as fantastic. Fantastic, namely pure fantasy as seen in fairy tales or science-fiction – 'is too static for the grotesque' (Foster 1967:41). The grotesque must always evoke associations with reality whether by juxtaposition, contrast or extension. The imagined world of fantasy does not have that impact on the reader demanded by the grotesque; the fantastic universe is too improbable to be taken seriously by the reader. But, in the realm of the grotesque, the categories are never fixed: they suddenly interchange, creating a new category and a new quality. It always evokes the sense of incongruity and discord between the created universe and the existing conception of what is natural and fitting (see Clayborough 1965:70). Thus, although it is true that the highly ambivalent character of life portrayed in *I Burn Paris* affects the place and time of the action, one has to reconsider calling the novel fantastic, for how is one to accept the impact of precisely rendered details? Already the title imposes a strong feeling of reality, placing the action in the capital of France, while the use of the present tense verbal form unequivocally establishes the time perspective. This is followed by the detailed topography of Paris, from the Moulin Rouge and Maxims to the Eiffel Tower, Montmartre, the Sacré-Cœur, the Panthéon, the Place de la Bastille, and Notre-Dame Cathedral, as well as dozens of other names of suburbs, parks, streets, squares, buildings, all of which are unmistakably identifiable with Paris.

Apart from that, there is ample direct and indirect reference to the historical chronology of events as well as to the epoch in which the events portrayed in the novel take place. The

story begins one November evening, the plague strikes on the eve of the French national holiday – Bastille Day, the Fourteenth of July – the plague ends on 4 September. Modern technology such as vehicles and the underground railway system, as well as mention of some contemporary heroes, such as Gerbault¹⁶, and the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia makes the date precisely 1926-27. But the familiarity of this background is illusory and deceptive, for in the same breath the narrator equally convincingly paints landscapes that belong to an entirely different – but seldom fantastic – category. The incongruity is not that these images are completely unfamiliar, but that they are grotesquely misplaced. Their association with the real and familiar is carefully maintained to achieve an atmosphere of bizarre strangeness. Such, for instance is the case with the sea imagery which defamiliarises the novel's universe to the point that it becomes grotesque:

Nad wieczorem lunął deszcz i pod chluszczącymi strumieniami wody twardé kontury przedmiotów zafalowały łagodnie, wydłużając się w głąb, jak zanurzone w warkim, przeszroczystym nurcie.

Zapadał zmrok. Zapalone latarnie, jak tłuste, bezbarwne plamy na atramentowej powierzchni nocy, niezdolne ani wsiąknąć w nią, ani jej rozświetlić, zaludniły koryto ulicy wodorostami cieni, fantastyczną fauną nieszczelnionych głębin.

Urwiste brzegi, pełne fosforyzujących, magicznych grot witryn jubilerskich, gdzie na skałach z zamku, wyłuskane z muszel, drzemią wielkie jak grochy dziewczęce perły – prostopadłymi ścianami wydłużały się w górę w daremnym poszukiwaniu powierzchni.

Szerokim wąwozem łożyska, z szumem elastycznych łusek opon płynęły stłoczone stada dziwacznych żelaznych ryb o ognistych, wybałuszonych głębiach, ocierając się o siebie po żądliwie bokami w obłokach błękitnawej ikry benzyny.

Wzdłuż stromych brzegów, poruszając się z wysiłkiem jak nurkowie w przeszroczystej galarecie wody, brnęli ołówianostopi ludzie pod ciężkimi skafandrami parasoli. (1957:19-20)

By the evening, rain came in torrents and, under the splashing streams of water, hard contours of objects rolled gently, extending into the depth, as if immersed in the rapid translucent current.

The dusk set in. The lighted lamps, like greasy, bleached stains on the inky surface of night – unable neither to permeate nor illuminate it – peopled the street-bed¹⁷ with the seaweeds of shadows, the fantastic fauna of impenetrable depths.

¹⁶ Alain Gerbault (1893-1941) was a French sailor who, as the first man ever, sailed alone across the Atlantic without calling into port. He was born in Laval (see footnote 20 below).

¹⁷ In the original *koryto ulicy*, literary meaning 'the river-bed of the street'.

Precipitous banks – full of phosphorescent, magic grottos of jewellery glass-cases where, on the rocks made of velvet, doze shelled bean-size maiden pearls – extended upwards with its perpendicular walls, in their vain search for the surface.

In the wide ravine of a [street-]bed¹⁸, with a hum of rubber scales of tyres, swam crammed schools of bizarre iron fish with fiery, bulging eyes, rubbing against one another lustfully in clouds of the bluish spawn of gasoline.

Along the steep banks, moving with difficulty, like divers in a translucent jelly of water, lead-footed people fought their way under the heavy diving-suits of umbrellas.

The city-ocean analogy is developed in such a way that readers are left speculating: is this the incomprehensible delusion of the protagonist, or is it the perspective of the narrator? Is it the description of some unusual ocean, or the metaphoric description of the city? Mysterious and inhospitable expanses of ocean well suit the author's intention to portray the menacing character of the urban environment; he persistently develops this image throughout the novel, ending with the 'sea of purifying fire' which irrevocably devours the city (335). Thus the streets are not only torrents of water but also a 'noisy stream of [...] black mob' (40) and 'waving oceans of streets' (53), populated by 'ill-boding apparitions' (65) and 'monsters with bulging eyes' (66). The *midinettes* do not come out on the street but 'gush in boisterous waves through the semi-open sluice-gates of shops' (52) and cars stream 'like dead inert birds, carried away on the surface of a black shiny current' (85). People are vulnerable, they depend on 'tides' which throw them on to the shores of boulevards (39). In this landscape the Moulin Rouge is a lighthouse, not only because it plays the rôle of the enticing yet deceiving¹⁹ place of entertainment: 'Huge, glowing windmill rotated slowly around its axle, luring ludicrous Don Quixotes [seeking] pleasure', but also because it physically resembles an ordinary lighthouse: 'a violent wave of cars was hitting the pavement next to the glazed lighthouse-like entrance-hall' (both 39). The 'ocean' imagery captures equally well the chaos in this world of 'chimerical absolute liberty' (52) and expresses the utter helplessness and feeling of infinite loneliness experienced by Pierre:

¹⁸ *łóżysko*, as previously used *koryto*, means river-bed. While in *koryto ulicy* (see above) the simile was intended, in this case *łóżysko* stands on its own, its use is unusual. The metaphoric character of this passage disintegrates; the narrator, thinking of one thing describes another. In the end, the reader is confused as to what is really being described.

¹⁹ Jasieński uses *mamiąć* from *mamić*, meaning both 'to deceive' and 'to lurk'.

*Ciepłe fale zmyły go jak drzazgę i poniosły bez busoli, na oslep.
 Rozpoczęły się znów dnie bezcelowej, bezładnej tułaczki po rozkołysanych
 oceanach ulic, noce pod mistycznymi parasolami gwiazd, samotność, jakiej ne zaznał
 nigdy Alain Gerbault, śmieszny Sancho Pansa huśtany miesiącami na bezbrzeżnych
 prześcieradłach Atlantyku. (1957:53)*

Warm waves washed him away like a splinter and carried him away without direction, haphazardly.

Again came days of aimless, disorderly wandering through the waving oceans of streets, nights under the mystic umbrellas of stars, loneliness never known to Alain Gerbault,²⁰ ridiculous Sancho Panza for months rocked on the shoreless sheets of the Atlantic.

Here Pierre is a helpless ‘splinter’, in another place he is caught by ‘the old waves, well known to him, like a ball’ (66). While we may reconcile one or even several such similes or comparisons, the author’s insistence on the image of the city-ocean creates a disturbing ambivalence which emphasises the nothingness of individual human existence.

The equivocal nature of the novel’s universe closely relates to the novel’s setting. The reader is affected by the nightmarish incomprehensibility of the universe which, although it seems authentic in respect of place and is rooted in an historically genuine milieu, it is nevertheless organised according to false logic and unconvincing causality (see below); it is populated with people living not by reason or feeling but by their odd obsessions; and it consists of strange images. There are also other factors which make the setting of the novel grotesque. The space of the action in the novel, both literally and figuratively, is absurdly alienated from the rest of the world – literally by a cordon of troops and fear of the plague, figuratively by allowing it to assume the character of a bizarre masquerade.²¹ Initially it is the celebration of Bastille Day which justifies this estranged universe:

²⁰ See above, footnote 16. Jasieński must have been impressed with Gerbault’s achievement. In his poem *Hostages*, he uses Gerbault’s name as a symbol of victory (1972:60); here however, his loneliness is mocked as insignificant by comparison to that suffered by Pierre. Nevertheless, Jasieński names his communist hero Laval after Gerbault’s place of birth. The main achievement of Laval is to sail on the Seine to get food supplies for the starving proletarian republic.

²¹ Foster, for instance, notes that ‘Among the most favoured settings of the grotesque story are a masquerade, a circus, parties of all sorts, because they provide for additional alienation from reality; sort of inner circle within a story.’ (1966:76)

Na ciasnym kwadracie pomiędzy 'Rotondą' i 'Dômem' osiem rozstawionych jazz-bandów ostrymi taskami synkop ćwiartowały żywe mięso nocy na posiekane ochłapy taktów. Różnojęzyczny tłum Amerykanów, Angielów, Rosjan, Szwedów, Japończyków i Żydów demonstrował spazmatycznym tańcem swą nieopisaną radość z powodu zburzenia starej Bastylii.

[...] Papierowe lampiony kołysały się łagodnie jak nenufary na zwierciadlanej powierzchni nocy. (1957:75-76)

On the crowded square between the 'Rotonda' and the 'Dôme', eight jazz-bands hacked²² the living flesh²³ of night with the sharp choppers of syncopation into the diced offal of bars of music. The multilingual crowd of Americans, English, Russians, Swedes, Japanese and Jews,²⁴ demonstrated through a spastic dance their inexplicable joy because the old Bastille was demolished.

[...] Chinese lanterns made of paper swung gently like water-lilies on the reflective surface of night.

The intensely grotesque image of the night being 'hacked' with the axe of music foretells the foreboding finale of this celebration, which is to assume the definite, menacing quality of the truly grotesque. In an ordinary masquerade, people dress or put on masks to disguise their true identity, while in *I Burn Paris* various characters change or accentuate their attire to emphasise their distinctiveness and their belonging to a specific race, religion, culture, nationality or ideology. A Russian immigrant Solomin, for instance, throws away his taxi driver's uniform and puts on the uniform he was wearing as a captain in the Russian Imperial army. While the matter of dress-code may be merely ludicrous – for who thinks of outfits looking into the eyes of death? – the fact that the plague decimates the city to the perpetual accompaniment of music and dance definitely takes on the significance of the grotesque.²⁵

*[...] Tańce zresztą nie ustawały.
Na tarasie kawiarni 'Dôme' Murzyn, grający na jazz-bandzie, w pół urwanego taktu runął w podrygach na bieben, śmiesznie wierzgając w powietrzu nogami. Rozbawiona*

²² In original ćwiartować, meaning 'to divide into quarters' as a slaughtered animal.

²³ In original mięso, meaning both 'flesh' and 'meat'.

²⁴ Literally, American, Russian and Japanese males and English, Swedish and Jewish females.

²⁵ Like the proverbial irony of the *Titanic* tragedy. Word of mouth has it that there was still music heard on the *Titanic* while it was being swallowed by the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

publiczność nagrodziła ten nowy trick spontanicznym brawem. Murzyn jednak nie wstawał. Odwrócono go twarzą do góry. Był martwy. (1957:77)

[...] Anyway, [the dancers] carried on dancing.

On the terrace of Cafe 'Dôme' a Negro who played in the jazz-band crashed on to the drum in the middle of a broken bar, ridiculously kicking his legs in the air. The cheerful public rewarded this new trick with spontaneous applause. Yet the Negro did not get up. He was turned face upwards. He was dead.

Thus the action of the novel unfolds against a bizarre cacophony of jazz music, 'ominous trumpets of ambulances' (77), gunshots, cries and prayers, until it all dissolves in the overpowering sound of church bells:

Na Sacré-Coeur były dzwony.

Z Notre-Dame, z Maddeleine, z małych rozrzuconych kościołów odpowidały im płaczliwym podźwiękiem dzwony Paryża.

[...] *Głuche, jękiowe dzwony nad miastem ołowianymi pięściami thukły we wkleśla spiżową piersi z wnętrza kościołów odpowidały im łomot kurczowo zaciśniętych rąk i gorzki pobożny mamrot. (1957:85, with minor changes repeated on p. 179)*

W cerkwi na ulicy Daru metropolita w złotych ryzach gęstym, dostałym basem czytał ewangelię i dzwony dzwoniły wszystkie jak w dzień wielkanocny.

W synagodze przy ulicy Victoire nad pasiastym thumem w tałesach płonęły świece i ludzie, jak język niewidzialnych dzwonów, kołysali się w wahadłowych ruchach, a powietrze jak dzwon, odpowidało lamentem. (1957:86, with minor changes repeated on p. 179)

Na Sacré-Coeur były dzwony, nieustanne, płaczliwe, bezradne. (1957:153)

In the Sacre-Coeur the bells pealed.

From Notre-Dame, from the Madeleine, from small scattered churches, the bells of Paris responded in a tearful echo.

[...] Over the city, dull, moaning bells rumbled into their concave bronze chests with lead fists, and from the church interiors there came the pounding²⁶ of convulsively clenched hands and a bitter, pious mumble.

²⁶ Here the meaning of *łomot*, 'pounding', and *thukły się*, 'rumbled' are interchangeable and in Polish both may be used with reference to a heartbeat. The expression 'pounding of clenched hands' is absurd; we speak of the pounding of a heart. Jasieński very seldom uses the word 'heart' directly, not only in *I Burn Paris* but in his other works as well. Nevertheless, here the gerund 'pounding' together the rumbling of bells implies a huge heart, pounding in inexplicable fear in the collective consciousness of Parisians.

In the Orthodox church on the Rue Daru, a metropolitan in gold habiliments read the gospel in a dense, dignified bass and all the bells pealed as if it were Easter Sunday.

In the synagogue on the Rue Victoire, the candles glowed over the striped crowd, [dressed] in tales, and people, like the tongues of invisible bells, swung in a pendulum-like movement, and the air, like a bell, answered with lamentation.

In the Sacre-Coeur the bells pealed, unceasing, tearful, helpless.

Apart from the fact that trumpets and bells herald the end of the world in a way reminiscent of the cataclysms described in various books of the Bible,²⁷ on the temporal level they create the atmosphere of ultimate pandemonium. As in many other instances, here too the morbid mood overlaps with the bizarre imagery evoked, in turn, through metaphors which create the semi-fantastic, semi-real world of the grotesque as summed up by one of the characters, Mr Lingslay, a prominent American businessman who as 'a soloist of some mad revue, had already accustomed himself to constant changes, which were daily introduced by the stage manageress Death' (276). In addition, the ludicrous partition of Paris – one of the most admired cities in the world – and its subsequent destruction subverts the normal and desirable order. Alcohol is proclaimed as 'the best serum' against the plague and 'demented [*oszalaty*] Paris defends itself with wine' (85). It is no longer the capital of France celebrating its national holiday, it is a caricature of everything that is base, unscrupulous, decadent and narrow-minded in the world. But even this interpretation is undermined in the grotesque, firstly because of the subjectivity of perception – the narrator accepts the grotesque as real and acceptable as reality itself: everyone has their 'own Paris, so much different from the Parises of other people who walk the same streets we do' (27) – and secondly because exactly the same events happen in other places. The novel ends with the almost literal repetition of its beginning, only the name of the city changes to that of Lyons.

Jasieński's manner of expression, which favours compound metaphors supported by strange similes and uncommon comparisons, is ideally suited to the grotesque; it undermines the straightforward interpretation of the narrative. The rich verbal stock used

²⁷ For example, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (8:1-8).

by Jasieński evokes imagery bordering on the fantastic, summoning a response ranging from bewilderment to revulsion and even terror; in other words, it promotes the grotesque, for – to use Harpham's words – 'grotesque forms in fact almost always inspire ambivalent emotional reaction' (1982:8). Humour, seen by some scholars²⁸ as a necessary element of the grotesque, is almost undetectable in *I Burn Paris*, although not entirely absent. As Foster points out, even 'non-comic grotesque [...] lacks the consistency and the pathos of [the truly tragic]' (1967:43). The atmosphere throughout the novel is thus predominantly morbid and ominous, notwithstanding its last part, which portrays a new, supposedly better world. Frequently, when the tension reaches its climax, the narration resorts to scornful irony or clownish grimaces which disarm the sense of morbidity or even calamity which has just started to seep into the reader's consciousness, and render it merely ludicrous. Some of such discrepancies between the content and the tone of the narration will be pointed out in the course of this chapter. Here the issue may be illustrated by what is a conspicuous example of the grotesque discord between the character of the event and the narrator's manner of presenting it:

Na asfalcie pozostała jedynie wątła dziewczyna, wijąca się w niepojętych zyzkach bólu. Krótka plisowana spódniczka podwinęła się do góry, odsłaniając drobne, prawie dziecięce kolana w naszyjnikach zbytkowych podwiązki i nieśmiały bieł chłopięcych ud, wychylających się niby przędne rozjatrzone węże z gęstwiny kremowych koronek. Ostre lakierowane pyszczki pantofelków drgały ustawicznie.

[...]

Dziewczyna nagle wzbijała się całym ciałem w górę, z nieludzką siłą uderzyła głową o asfalt i przycichnęła. [...] Filigranowe nóżki, osnute niedostrzegalną pajęczyną pończochy, zastygły sztywno zadartoszy w górę zdumione pyszczki pantofelków.
(1957:79-80)

On the tarmac there was only a frail girl, writhing in the unimaginable zigzags of pain. A short pleated skirt tucked up, baring her petite, almost childish knees in the necklaces of luxurious garters and a timid whiteness of boyish thighs, leaning out from the

²⁸ For example, Jennings favours the balance between the fearful and the ludicrous in the grotesque: 'The grotesque is an intimate combination of both features. It can never lie entirely in the realm of the terrible, for it arises only when terrible is treated playfully and rendered ludicrous. On the other hand, it can never be completely innocuous or playful, even if the fantastic or scurrilous form of play is meant' (1963:16).

thicket of cream-coloured lace like vigorous vexed snakes. The mouths²⁹ of her pointed lacquered shoes twitched persistently.

[...]

Suddenly, the girl's whole body rose up and with an inhuman force she hit the tarmac with her head, then she became calm. [...] Her dainty legs, covered with a barely visible web of stockings, froze stiffly pointing the mouths of her shoes upwards.

The image of a dying girl is deprived of facial features, while her protruding convulsed limbs are by the reader's normal standards given undeserved prominence. The dignity of death is rendered laughable. Jeannette dies looking like the 'sex-toy' she was in life, and even in death she evokes no pity. The focus on Jeannette's sensuality is similar to that seen in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*. The physicality of death is emphasised through the deliberately grotesque image of legs sticking out from under the skirt, and convulsively jerking and kicking. The horror of the scene is disarmed by the narrator's interest in the girl's attire, while by comparing the legs of the dying girl to snakes the author makes her even less human. Because the narrator fails to recognise Jeannette's humanness even in death, she becomes no more than a grotesque marionette, and the emotional impact of her tragedy is significantly reduced.

The strategy illustrated in case of the portrayal of Jeannette's death applies elsewhere, even in the least expected situations, as when the narrator comments on the findings of a pilot who flew over the city and reported the cataclysmic conflagration of Paris; even then the cynicism is striking: 'inclined to an easy affectation, granny-Europe grew sentimental over the fate of this unfortunate city and began to cry with true, non-glycerine tears that day' (337). The horrendous tragedy of Paris has merited only a melodramatic reaction, betraying the narrator's familiarity with the grotesque's predisposition to present 'the terrible in harmless guise' (Jennings 1963:16). Such sudden turn-abouts in the tone of the narration render the tragedy as absurd and pointless, while the element of the comic,³⁰

²⁹ Developing the image of Jeannette's legs as snakes, Jasieński describes her shoes as *pyszczki* which, in Polish, is a diminutive form for the mouths of animals.

³⁰ Foster notes that 'The grotesque comic differs from other types of the humorous, because due to the devices by which it is created, its effect depends upon the collapse of the reader's logic. The comic effect is not detached amusement, or pure joy, but leaves the reader wondering and at times

however disturbing readers may feel about it, makes the seriousness of the tragedy doubtful. As pointed out in the chapter discussing *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, the reader's attitude to such a narrative is in the end one of horror and disbelief. The narrator's lighthearted attitude to the death of thousands upon thousands of people makes the experience of reading *I Burn Paris* a mind-boggling one.

The narrative tone awakens the apprehension caused by the impossibility of establishing the narrator's point of view and his attitude to the actions of the novel's protagonists. The position of the narrator is important, because through him the reader hopes to learn the author's own position towards the created universe and its moral, social or philosophical foundations. Initially, he seems to be a typically omniscient narrator: for instance, he knows from the beginning that 'in a few hours, this strange city will be condemned to death' (29). In places, the narrator comes very close to expressing the author's own point of view, assuming the collective 'we' form of address but betraying his own sentiments, as illustrated by the almost philosophical digression regarding the uniqueness of one's experience in a big city:

[...] *I miasto, przemierzane przez nas co dzień, oderwane paciorki obrazów, które utrwała nasz wzrok na negatywie pamięci, zrastają się w nas w jednolite pojęcie miasta dopiero nawlecone na tę niewidzialną nic rozsianych po nim naszych kroków, tę nieuchwytną mapę naszego własnego Paryża, jakże inną od Paryżów innych ludzi, przebiegających tymi samymi, co i my, ulicami.* (1957:27)

[...] And the city through which we wander daily, the detached beads of images that our eyes fix on the negative of memory, merge in us into the homogenous concept of the city, but only when we string them on the invisible thread of our steps scattered on its streets, this invisible map of our own Paris, so much different from the Parises of other people who walk the same streets we do.

Although the reflections of the author permeate this statement, the style reflects the narrator's predisposition for extravagantly elaborate imagery and syntactic complexity, casting doubt on the author's relationship with the narrator. The narrator's voice blends in form, content, and tonality with the voices of the characters, adopting their points of

even uncomfortably so' (1967:42).

view and their attitudes to life. Thus in Part I it is impossible to establish whether the bizarrely grotesque visions of Paris are born in Pierre's paranoid mind or whether they are true-to-life descriptions of dreary metropolitan landscapes rendered to the narrator's best ability. In Part II it is impossible to distinguish between the narrator's views and the views of various characters, for instance, the Chinese boy and future revolutionary, P'an Tsiang-Kuei, Boris Solomin, the American businessman David Lingslay, or the views of the Communist Laval. The tone of narration changes constantly from objective to personal, from solemn to ironic, to derisive. Even in Part III the narrator does not distance himself critically from the narrative, sharing the characters' disdain for the old, recently destroyed civilisation and partaking in their indiscriminate enthusiasm for building the new one.

Thus in the chapters conveying the life-story of P'an Tsiang-Kuei, the narrator's voice becomes almost indistinguishable from that of P'an. In this way, the portrayal of the familiar world of rural China – as seen by the teenage boy – can stand as exemplary realism: temperate tonality, the style direct and easy to understand, sentences straightforward and moderate in length, unequivocal, emotionally neutral imagery, so distinct from the paranoid perception perpetuated by the narration in Part I. This is the style we usually expect from an omniscient narrator, but also the style in which the experience of the familiar is retold. However, when P'an comes into contact with the foreign European civilisation, the narrative enters the realm of the grotesque, unequivocally assuming the point of view of P'an. For instance, during the first encounter with a motor car, the Chinese boy's curiosity and admiration are invaded with fear of the unknown: 'uncanny carriages racing on the streets, without any rails, without horses, without *jinrickiman*' (95). As he grows older, P'an hears more and more bizarre stories about white people that are 'hated by everyone' and imagines them to be 'magic, all-wise creatures' (98). Trying to accustom himself to their culture he adopts their words to his own language, to the amusement of both the readers and the author. Thus the boy learns from his mentor Czao-Lin that the weird carriage's surname is *Au To Mo-bil* and its names

vary from *Bra-Zje*³¹, *Pa-Nar*, *Dai-Mler*, to *Na-Pier*, *Re-no* and *Mer Ce-des* (100). Jasieński here clearly enjoys his creative imagination, making yet another point that the perception of life is subjective and personal. But since he prefers the grotesque to serious debates, instead of explaining his point he simply illustrates it with a grotesque device – he defamiliarises language. While objects remain unaltered, their names assume unfamiliar grotesque forms.³² The situation is different in the case of houses. In this case, it is the familiar image that is defamiliarised to the point of the outlandish grotesque:

Gdzieś o wiele, wiele li, stoją olbrzymie, potworne miasta, gdzie biali ludzie meiskają w wielopiętrowych skrzyniach i w skrzyniach tych, zamiast schodów, w górę i w dół pędzą ruchome pudełeczka, podrzucając w jednej chwili mieszkańców na najwyższe piętra. Pod ziemią długimi rurami mkną jak błyskawice wagony, przewożąc w ciągu minuty przechodniów o dziesiątki li. Aby biały człowiek nie potrzebował trudzić się sam, dniem i nocą w wielkich fabrykach pracują na niego ogromne maszyny, wyrzucając mu od razu gotowe rzeczy. Chcesz ubranie – bierz i wkładaj. Chcesz kolaskę – siadaj i jedź Ani rykszy ani koni. Wszystko maszyna. Dziwne, ciężkie słowo – aż bucha od niego rozpalonym żelazem. Nawet po to, aby zabijać wrogów – nie pojedynczo, lecz hurtem – biali ludzie wymyślili podobno też specjalne maszyny. (1957:98)

Somewhere, many, many *li*³³ away, there are enormous, monstrous cities, where white people live in multi-storeyed cases, and in these cases, instead of stairs mobile little boxes rush up and down, instantly lifting inhabitants up to the highest storeys. Under the ground there are carriages speeding like thunderbolts along the interminable tubes, and carrying passing pedestrians by tens of *li* away in a minute. Not to toil himself the white man [invented] huge machines that work for him day and night in the large factories, instantly throwing out for him ready-made things. You require clothes – take and put on. You require a coach – sit in and drive on. No *jinrickiman*, no horses. Everything is a machine. Strange, heavy word – you feel it blazes with white-hot iron. There is a rumour

³¹ The origins of this name are unknown; Kolesnikoff translates it as ‘Brasey’ (1982:79) but it is possible that Jasieński derived it from ‘Bersey’ – electric vehicles, which enjoyed a certain popularity at the turn of the century (see *The Car. Its History*. Cathay Books, 1979:23). The remaining names refer to: Automobile, Panhard, Daimler, Napier, Renault and Mercedes.

³² In respect of the above, Kolesnikoff comments: ‘*I Burn Paris* abounds in passages where the author “refuses to recognise” familiar objects and describes them as if they were seen for the first time’ (1982:79). Kolesnikoff’s point denies the author that distance he might want to keep from the universe he creates. The perception of little P’an is more authentic in the way it is presented in the novel; that is, it is conveyed by the narrator who identifies with the protagonist.

³³ Kolesnikoff translates this word as ‘leagues’ (1982:79). My translation retains the expression used by Jasieński, as an additional proof that the narrator identifies with P’an.

that even for killing their enemies – not individually but wholesale – white people have also invented special machines.

As one might expect, the boy's dream consists of similar imagery:

Od takich rozmów małemu P'anowi kręciło się w głowie i młotem dudniło w skroniach. Po nocach śniły mu się olbrzymie, żelazne miasta, gigantyczne, potworne maszyny z rozdziawionymi, stalowymi paszczami; z paszcz ich wylatywały potokiem gotowe ubrania, kapelusze, parasole, kolaski, domy, ulice, miasta... I budząc się w nocy, P'an marzył: wyrośnie, przedostanie się tam [...], wykradnie tajemnice białych ludzi [...]. (1957:99-100)

From such conversations the head of little P'an reeled and it felt as if a hammer was pounding in his temples. At night he dreamed of enormous iron cities, gigantic, monstrous machines with wide open steel muzzles. From these muzzles were streaming ready-made garments, hats, umbrellas, coaches, houses, streets, cities... And waking up at night P'an dreamed: he will grow up [...], he will steal the secret of the white people [...].

The novel's universe, as well as the psychotic perspectives of various characters and their so-called dreams all have the same features – they are concoctions typical of the grotesque universe. The grotesque does not differentiate between invention and reality, and neither does the narrator of the grotesque. The enigmatic nature of the narrator, his mischievous confusion of realms, identities, actions and beliefs, as well as the instability of his views and attitudes, frustrate any attempt on the reader's part to establish a link between the author, the narrator and the novel's characters.

One may argue that the purpose of the kind of narrative strategy encountered in *I Burn Paris* – that is, of presenting various points of view as directly as possible – is to achieve the maximum objectivity, to show the world as others see it. The point is that despite all those different points of view, none of them distinguishes itself enough to justify individual mention. On the contrary, their significance lies in the fact that they all produce the same image of a world that is grotesquely distorted, emotionally handicapped and lopsided. P'an's perception of the cities of whites is very similar to the monstrous city that exists in the mind of Pierre, and in the narrator's own relation of the urban landscapes depicted in the novel. This vision of the world as morally and socially corrupt was earlier seen in the

author's, that is, in Jasieński's own poetry and is also evident in the coverage of life in Paris he sent to the tabloid magazine *Wiek nowy* ('The New Era') where he observed that Paris is 'a strange, ancient city' which appears to the foreigner's eye to represent a civilisation 'devoured by consumption'. He wrote that 'Paris consists of a number of isolated cities with distinct individuality, cities joined only by the net of trams, buses and a metro'. He was most explicit in describing the decay of 'Lower Montmartre – an insidious net developed on foreigners' money – a suburb of debauchery. [...] The mad city of dancing-halls, restaurants, pubs – dead during the day, not resembling its own self.' In his view, Parisians were 'fed with erotic gruel' which caused some of them to 'react like people who had eaten too many sweet preserves'.³⁴

The apparent confusion of the origins of various points of view in the novel prevents the reader from establishing Jasieński's own attitude to its content, whether affirmative, critical, ironic or even satirical. Especially when it comes to the pivotal act of Pierre poisoning the water system of Paris with the devilish intention of killing millions of people³⁵ the reader not only wants to know but feels he has the right to know what Jasieński personally thinks about this act. The grotesque ambiguity of the narrative strategy renders such an investigation inconclusive and leaves the reader in a state of considerable apprehension. But such is the objective of the grotesque narrative.

The lack of balance in the attitude to life in all the characters is startling. It reaches its formal epitome in the case of Rabbi Eleazar ben Cwi identified with a flat-fish, in a witty grotesque image. Considering that the novel is set in Paris, one of the chapters begins with

³⁴ Jasieński earned his living in Paris by writing articles for *Wiek nowy*, which was a society magazine published in Lvov and to which, according to Dziarnowska, Jasieński contributed 'more than 30 letters' during his first year in Paris. All the entries are quoted here following Dziarnowska 1982:145-146, 165, 166.

³⁵ Compare Jasieński's comment in a letter his friend: *słaby jestem w statystyce a szczodry w millionach* 'I am incompetent when it comes to statistics, but I am generous with millions' (in Dziarnowska 1982:162).

several paragraphs describing the ocean, at the bottom of which lives a fish called a flounder:

[...] *Wziął ktoś rybę, rozciągającą wzdłuż grzbietu przez pół i połowę położył na piasku. Ryba flądra ma tylko jedną stronę – prawą. Lewą jej stroną jest ziemia, dno.*

Od nieużywania organu organ zanika. Wszystkie organy flądry z lewej, nie istniejącej strony przeniosły się na prawą. Iz prawej strony, jedno obok drugiego, patrzy zawsze w góre para małych, beznamiętnych oczu.

Oczy patrzą zawsze w góre, oba po jednej stronie, poczwarne, niesamowite, dziwaczne, a lewej strony – w ogóle nie ma. (1957:155-156)

[...] Someone took the fish, cut it in half along its spine and put it on the sand. The flounder has only one side – right. Its left side is earth, the bottom.

An organ, if not used, vanishes. All the organs of the flounder moved from the non-existing left side, to the right one. Thus on this right side is a pair of tiny dispassionate eyes, one next to the other, always staring upwards.

The eyes always look up, both on the one side, monstrous, uncanny, weird, while the other side does not exist at all.

After reporting his observation of life in the depths of an ocean, the narrator returns to describing the more familiar scenery of Paris, the suburb of the Hôtel de Ville, inhabited by Polish and Russian Jews. ‘Deposited’ there for decades, they settled in ‘a solid, insoluble, isolated ghetto’ (156). And, as in a previous image, waves, ships and sea-fauna created a unique turmoil on the ‘aching surface of the ocean’ (155). Here too, the human flat-fish lives amidst the ‘seething masses of people, the surfacing and falling of new cabinets, the crashing and racing of events’ (156). Like the flounder, Rabbi Eleazar lives oblivious to ‘the surface of the solution of city life’:

Rabi Eleazar ben Cwi ma dwoje osadzonych blisko siebie oczu i oczy patrzą zawsze w góre, beznamiętne, małe, bliźniacze, obrócone ku niebu, w którym zdają się widzieć jakieś dla nich tylko dostrzegalne rzeczy. Od nieużywania organu organ zanika. Rabi Eleazar ben Cwi widzi wiele rzeczy niedostępnych ludzkiemu wzroku, a nie widzi tych najprostszych; ma jednak tylko stronę – tę zwróconą do nieba, a tej obróconej ku ziemi – w ogóle nie ma. (1957:157)

Rabbi Eleazar ben Cwi has two closely set eyes and these eyes always look upwards, dispassionate, tiny, identical, turned to heaven³⁶, where they appear to see some things

³⁶ Used by Jasieński *niebo* is ambivalent, it means both ‘the sky’ and ‘the heaven’.

which are only perceivable to them. An organ, if not used, vanishes. Rabbi Eleazar ben Cwi sees many things that are inaccessible to the human sight, but he does not see those most ordinary things; he has only one side – the one turned to heaven – and the one turned towards the earth is not present at all.

These two quotations, especially when taken individually, are not grotesques. In the case of the fish, its description is witty though accurate. So also is the description of the rabbi whose portrayal, though rendered with a great deal of irony, enables us to capture the main features of his face – his eyes. The reader understands that because of this irony, the reference to eyes must not be taken literally but as an expression of the rabbi's attitude to life. But the full significance of the second image is realised only when the two images are juxtaposed, and judging by the arrangement of the text, such a reading was intended. The parallel reading confuses the realms: the rabbi becomes much less human, while the aquatic universe enters into a reciprocally metaphoric arrangement with the human world. This is done for a reason, namely, to open the rabbi's religiosity to mockery :

O rabim Eleazarze można by powiedzieć, że ma do dyspozycji osobną linię i rozmawiać może z Bogiem o każdej porze, bez obawy, że mu ktoś przerebie. Zresztą rebe Eleazar wie, że Pan Bóg, jak każdy Żyd, nie lubi by go nagabywano, gdy jest zajęty, i wie już, w jakich godzinach można porozmawiać z nim najswobodniej. I Pan Bóg ma za to słabość do rebegego Eleazara, i nie było jeszcze wypadku, aby mógł mu czegoś odmówić. (1957:159)

One may say that Rabbi Eleazar had at his disposal separate lines and could speak to God any time of the day without worrying that someone might interrupt him. Anyway, *Rebe* Eleazar knows that the Good Lord, like any other Jew, does not like to be bothered when he is busy, and knows during which hours it is best to talk to him. Because of this, the Good God has a weak spot for *Rebe* Eleazar, and it is yet to happen that God would refuse him when he needed his help.

The intention of such ironic entries is not to elevate the rabbi but rather to downgrade God, who appears to be little more than the rabbi's business partner. In the context of the whole novel, the above case illustrates one of the strategies used by Jasieński to expose religion not only as an important factor dividing people, but also as a handy tool for manipulating others into obedience.

Stern is absolutely right in saying that 'the "formalism" of artistic devices³⁷ obscures the clarity of political meaning and of the propagandistic significance of the novel' (1969:149), especially if the phrase 'formalism of artistic devices' is replaced with a more straightforward categorisation of Jasieński's style as grotesque. But the grotesque in *I Burn Paris* also affects other aspects of the novel, such as the plot, the hero, the logic which structures the narrative into consecutive events, and so forth. Because of the novel's problematic nature, the narrator must be dismissed right away as its bonding agent. As far as the plot and the hero are concerned, their bonding quality is repudiated by the novel's structure. *I Burn Paris* is composed of three parts, each of which differs significantly in respect of its theme, set of characters, objectives and even the tone of narration. Part I concerns itself with Pierre, the character whose humble background and some unfortunate turn of events in his life, namely his loss of employment and of his beloved, push him towards utter desperation, ending in his poisoning the whole of Paris with plague microbes. Part II looks at the effect the plague has on the inhabitants of Paris. Pierre, the chief protagonist of the previous part, dies at the very beginning of Part II, while the narrator proceeds to expose the behaviour of some other Parisians who pursue their petty interests instead of uniting forces to combat the mortal danger of pestilence. Part III describes the rebirth of Paris after all its inhabitants have died in the epidemic, that is, all except a handful of prisoners who by the virtue of their isolation remained uninfected. The dominantly morbid tonality of Part I dissipates in Part II into a mixture of the apocalyptic vision of the decaying Paris and a satire on the self-satisfaction and moral smugness of the middle classes. Part III focuses on the restoration of the world according to new, presumably better laws, demonstrating several outbursts of enthusiasm and happiness. Apart from a number of stylistic devices which intrinsically maintain the grotesque character of the narrative, there are other devices which affect the perception of the novel in the process of the reader's juxtaposition of its content with his own criteria about what

³⁷ Here we understand 'formalism' as a means to 'de-familiarise' the world. Stern traces the origins of Formalism back to the *Opojaz*, that is 'The Society of Poetic Language', a group of Russian scholars who intended to 'fathom the philosophy of the word' by the scientific exploration of the poetic language. He considers the poetic style of *I Burn Paris* to be characterised by the 'Formalistic hermeticism', for which 'Soviet critics excused Jasieński because of his emphatic stress on social and class problematics' (1969:146-147).

is normal, orderly and admissible.³⁸ Part I is based on an inane logic, considering the relationship it establishes between the premises of Pierre's actions and their effect; Part II has a structure as incoherent as the life it portrays; Part III is a misrepresented Utopia. However, because each part is a segment in a larger whole, its individual character is imparted to this whole. Thus the logic, the structure, the optimistic ending of the novel, are all affected by the characteristics of all its components, and have to be assessed in this interdependent relationship.

Everything that has its beginning must have its end is one of those simple rules which we are ready to accept without further elucidation. However, between the beginning and the end – or the cause and the result – lies a whole vastness of associations and connections. Some of them are probable, logical, tangible, reasonable or acceptable, while others are improbable, absurd, elusive, excessive, or simply inadmissible. The grotesque favours the latter, consisting of concepts which against all reason and probability unite cause and result by surrendering the sense of symmetry, harmony and proportion, but their relationship is presented to the reader as rational, acceptable and the only one possible. In other words, the grotesque validates its own flawed logic not only as the normal order of the day, but as the only order possible in the world.

The issue of flawed logic inherent to the grotesque was discussed in the chapter on *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* where the scientific laws of cause and effect were suspended entirely, as for example in the case of the dismembered organs that continued to live. Similar cases have already been quoted in respect of *I Burn Paris*: figurative expressions are rendered literally, for instance the speaking head (277) or wrinkled lemon in glasses teaching children to read (93). However, I am less interested in that kind of logic, than in the logic which is infinitely more horrifying and perilous to humanity. From the beginning it is evident that in *I Burn Paris* – intentionally or not – Jasieński exposes a reasoning that

³⁸ Foster notes that the grotesque might be intrinsic due to the 'discrepancies in the text itself' (evident in quotations above) and extrinsic due to the discrepancy 'between the author's presentation and the reader's familiar frame of mind' (1967:41).

obeys the laws of scientific possibility and practical probability, yet it is impossible for the reader to admit this reasoning as normal.

The plot of the whole novel develops logically: Pierre is losing his job, he is unemployed and angry, he meets his friend who works in the laboratory, one day he visits the laboratory and learns all about microbes, his disillusionment grows beyond his endurance, he decides to avenge his suffering and introduces the microbes of the plague into the water system of Paris on the night preceding the Fourteenth of July celebrations. The timing is impeccable, Pierre's reasoning is precise: the night is hot, everyone is on the streets dancing, people quench their thirst.³⁹ The rest is a matter of time. As Paris succumbs to the grip of pestilence, a handful of prisoners is destined to survive because, as the narrator motivates it, they do not use the same water system as the rest of the population and rely on separate food storage (320). What a precise chain of consecutive events! But if we juxtapose the beginning and the end of the novel we see that, although the logic of the narrative is scientifically realistic, its intrinsic rationale is frighteningly deviant.

The intrinsic rationale of Part I rests on the figure of Pierre, who seems to be a close relative of Berg from *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, including a certain affinity with the

³⁹ The fact that in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* Jasieński had already written that 'after all, tramways, as well as the water-supply system are used by everybody' (*Przecież i tramwaje, i wodociągi, z których korzysta każdy, to też maszyny* [1966:30]) is worth mentioning here because it emphasises the intrinsic logic of Pierre's thinking, namely that *everybody* relies on the water system. Betraying a certain affinity between the author of *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* and the protagonist of *I Burn Paris*, this fact proves that Jasieński might initially have been concerned with the destructive potential of modern technological civilisation and that originally the novel was conceived as purely catastrophist. He might have changed his plans later, imbuing the action of his hero with ideological considerations, even if these are unspecified. By contrast, in the 1934 Russian version of the novel, this motif was subjected to the most drastic revision. In the 1934 version, according to Balcerzan, Pierre does not want the destruction of Paris. Hence the whole section leading to the actual contamination of the water system had to be rewritten: for instance, Pierre does not meet René, for he does not need access to the laboratory where the microbes of the plague are stored. Pierre is only an involuntary tool in the hands of the French imperialist government, which supplies him with the deadly microbes. He thus only follows instructions, and just a few seconds after he has carried out the orders, he is arrested by patrolling workers and immediately executed for sabotage (1968:326).

author himself.⁴⁰ Pierre is obsessed with a woman whom he lost to rich men in the same way as Berg was obsessed with Isolda whom he lost because of machines. Pierre's perception of the world is affected in a similar way by the loss of Jeannette as Berg's when he lost Isolda; it seems that in both cases the sanity of the protagonists disintegrated to the point of paranoia, but the narrator chooses to withhold any information which would definitely clarify this issue for the reader. Berg was driven by fear and hatred, while Pierre curses them all – machines and people – because they all keep him away from Jeannette:

Środkiem bulwaru, całując się co krok, idzie przytulona do siebie para. Mały kapelusik. Długie smukłe nogi. Jeannette!! Para wchodzi do narożnego hoteliku, nie przestając się całować. Znów auto – przeklęte auto! – zatarasowało drogę (1957:42)

In the middle of the boulevard, a couple walks, cuddling and kissing all the time. A little hat. Long, slender legs. Jeannette!! The couple enters a small corner hotel, kissing non-stop. Again a car – damned car! – blocked the road.

Pierre's inexplicable hatred is incomparably greater than Berg's and he not only threatens but carries out his vengeance. From the ideological point of view, his thinking is more informed, and because he understands that money buys food and sex, he also realises the extent of social inequality. However his realisation of the class composition of society is based on the confusion of personal wrongs (lost love) and social injustice (lost job), which dissipate in him in the agonising feeling of hunger and render him incapable of identifying the real enemy. He perceives life as a 'deluge of lustful corporality' (53) and sees the enemy in 'men with necks of salami' (38), or 'men without faces' (43), and their doubles, always qualified by an adjective indicating excessive obesity of body and purse:

[...] Taxi z Jeannette odjechało. Przed bramą hoteliku zostało opaść jegomość, sprawdzając przy świetle latarni zawartość pękatego portfela. Na obwistych policzkach dogasają jeszcze rumieńce doświadczonej przed kilku minutami rozkoszy. Na obleśnych wargach wiecznie ostatni poczułek Jeannette. (1957:43)

⁴⁰ Evident, for instance, in the scene when Pierre is beaten with sticks by the mob (83), or seen in the analogy between Pierre and Christ (67), which existed in the poetry between Christ and the poet.

[...] The taxi with Jeannette had just left. In front of the hotel, in the light of a lamp a rotund gentleman was standing checking the contents of his bulging purse. The blush of ecstasy experienced a moment ago is still colouring his flabby checks. On his lustful oily lips wilts Jeannette's last kiss.

Pierre sees these men everywhere and always sexually involved with Jeannette, who in the meantime multiplies in hundreds, and is everywhere, in every third-rate hotel. The streets of Paris are full of petite Jeannettes being caressed and devoured in a sexual act by fat men:

[...] Ulicami przelewały się nieprzebrane tłumy ludzi, grubych, spasionych mężczyzn o szyjach z salami. Każdy z nich może zeszłą nocą, może przed chwilą, mógł spać z Jeannette. [...] Pierre z uporem maniaka wpatrywał się w twarze przechodniów starając się dostrzec w nich jakiś ślad, jakiś najdrobniejszy skurcz pozostawiony przez rozkosz przeżytą z Jeannette. [...]

Jeannette nie było, nie było jej nigdzie.

A jednak była wszędzie. Pierre widział, rozpoznawał ją dokładnie w sylwetce każdej dziewczyny wychodzącej w towarzystwie amanta z drzwi każdego hoteliku, przejeżdżającej obok taksówki, znikającej nagle w czeluściach pierwszej spostrzeżonej bramy. (1957:38-39)

[...] Through the streets were flowing innumerable masses of people, fat, obese men with necks of salami. Every one of them could have slept with Jeannette, perhaps last night, perhaps a moment ago. [...] With the obstinacy of a maniac, Pierre looked into the faces of passers-by, trying to find some trace, some smallest contraction left there by the ecstasy of their experience with Jeannette.

Jeannette was not there; she was nowhere.

And yet she was everywhere. Pierre saw her, literally recognising her in the silhouette of every girl accompanied by her beau upon leaving a hotel, [he saw her] in passing-by taxis, [he saw her] disappearing suddenly into the abyss of the first available gate.

The narrator does not ease the reader's growing apprehension about the symptoms of Pierre's growing lunacy. Seen in this fragment, the allusion to his 'obstinacy of a maniac' is used as a commonplace figurative expression, but not entirely devoid of inherent ambiguity. The logic of the narrator's thinking seems to imply that fat men signify the oppressive system, while Pierre's yearning – for a woman as well as for food – is meant to signify the yearning for social justice. This supposedly vindicates his radical hatred of people and ultimately of the existing order, but the lack of clarity about the reasons for this hatred and of acceptable evidence in the novel of social oppression, leaves a wide margin

for interpretation. Pierre clearly makes no distinction between hatred and the social cause; that is why he chooses 'the loneliness of a turtle' (50).

Jasieński had already explored the ambivalence of the notion of hunger, emphasising the feeling of polyvalent yearning rather than unequivocal physiological craving for food ('At night, with a new burning contraction, more painful than hunger, Jeannette's name trembled in him' [30]). Pierre's craving makes him realise that the world is split into those who have the means to buy food and women, and those who live in constant deprivation of both. But in Pierre's mind sickening abundance and horrifying destitution do not inspire images of social exploitation but, instead, fuse into a single image of perverted depravity:

[...] *Spiętrzona rzeka ciał, banknotów, uczynków, butelek, wysiłków, lamp, kiosków, nóg wydęta falą przewala się powyżej dachów z hukiem i wrzawą. Z rozdziawionych paszcz hoteli, jak szuflady z otwartych drzwi szaf, wysypują się wiekowe, niewietrzne, przespane na wylot materace, rosną, wystrzelają w góre olbrzymią stupażtrowę wieżę Babel o zgrzytliwych sprężynowych stopniach. A na górze, na olbrzymim, czteroosobowym materacu wszechnarodowego łóżka (Le lit national) leży małejka bezbronna Jeannette. Po rozdygotanych stopniach w góre pnie się, jak mrówki, nieprzebrany tłum męczyczyzn, blondynów, brunetów, rudych, aby na chwilę nakryć ją, zmęczoną, ciężkim pożądliwym cielskiem, jeden za drugim, wszyscy, miasto, Europa, świat!* (1957:46-47)

[...] A towering river flows over the roofs with its noisy and rumbling bulging wave of bodies, banknotes, deeds, bottles, endeavours, lamps, kiosks, legs. From the widely open muzzles of hotels, like drawers from open wardrobes, fall out ancient, unaired, slept-through mattresses and grow, shoot upwards like a huge hundred-storey tower of Babel with a grating staircase of springs. And at the top, on the large four-person mattress of the national bed lies tiny defenceless Jeannette. Up the trembling stairs, like ants, climb unending crowds of men, blond, dark-, red-haired, only to cover her – tired – for a while with their heavy lusty bodies, one after the other, all of them, the whole city, Europe, the world!

This markedly grotesque vision can easily be mistaken for the description of some grotesque painting, perhaps technically similar to the one which was retrieved by the poet from his friend's head (see quotation on p. 99). As pointed out earlier, from the vantage point of the grotesque such a strategy is considered the most effective, for it immediately makes the reader *see* its grotesqueness, the incompatibility of components of which the image is composed, and to assess it in relation to his own understanding of normal, real,

and logical, as well as to fit it into his own aesthetic codes. The grotesque character of this image lies not only in the indiscriminate assembly of things (banknotes, bottles, kiosks, lamps), actions (deeds, endeavours) and human bodies (bodies, legs), but also in its emphasis on the obscene and lewd. Furthermore this revolting, concupiscent and maggoty pile of mattresses is contextualised within the Biblical imagery of the Tower of Babel. The impact of similar images on the apocalyptic tonality of the novel will be assessed later. Here let it suffice to point out that this specific case epitomises Pierre's contempt for and revulsion with a world obsessed with food and sex, a resentment which applies in the same degree to humans as it does to the material world, and which may be illustrated by the following grotesque image of cars in a sexual orgy:

Za uciekającą przodem, rasową i smukłą jak charcica Hispano-Suizą o wystraszonych ślepiach latarni, ociekającą żeńskim sokiem benzyny, z ujadaniem i skowystem, odgryzającą się nawzajem i na przózno usiłując przypaść nozdrzami do jej kobiecego podogonia, sadziły majestatyczne, stateczne jak dogi Rolls-Royce'y, przysadziste jak jamniki Amilkary, brudne i bezpańskie jak kundle Fordy i kuse, kurtyzowane jak foxterriery Citroënki; pstra, rozjuszona sfora psów w okresie rui. Nad ulicą unosił się zgiełk, omdlewający zapach samki, wrzask obłędnej pogoni, odurzający czad letniego upałnego popołudnia. (1957:53)

Behind the pedigreed Hispano-Suiza, slender as a greyhound,⁴¹ with the frightened eyes of lanterns, dripping the female juice of gasoline, raced Rolls-Royces, majestic and staid like great Danes, Amilcars⁴² squat like dachshunds, Fords dirty and homeless like mongrels, Citroëns scanty and docked like fox-terriers; a motley enraged pack of dogs in heat, barking and yelping, biting back and trying in vain to catch with their nostrils the smell of her female under-tail. In the air there was an uproar, a languid smell of a bitch, the fracas of mad pursuit, the stupefying choke-damp of the scorching afternoon.

The grotesque character of this image needs little explication. Firstly its origins are not explained by the narrative; at no point can the reader decide whether it conveys objective reality or is born in Pierre's mind as a result of his disgust. Secondly, the metaphor

⁴¹ Hispano-Suizas were first among the super-luxurious motor cars of the nineteen- twenties, produced by the Paris-based company from 1919, although initially it was founded in Spain in 1904 (*The Car.* 1979:140).

⁴² The Amilcar was made in France and it was considered its best light sport car during the nineteen-twenties (*The Car...* 1979:144).

confusing the categories of human, canine and mechanical constantly oscillates between figurative and literal meaning. Thirdly, the image created is revolting, yet a dose of wit makes it ludicrous. Nevertheless, it is this reality that eventually leads Pierre to the conclusion that 'the world is like a badly structured machine that has to be destroyed before it can be built anew' (49). Although there are occasional references to social conditions – 'the world of hostile and inaccessible things' (51), 'labour is the hygiene of a freed body' (49) – their impact is insignificant in comparison to the overpowering image of the moral baseness of Paris. It is not my intention to judge the impact of Jasieński's strategy on the merit of the novel, but merely to point out that the grotesque ambivalence and ambiguity of imagery fosters in the reader doubt about whether the logical premises for the protagonist's disillusionment with the world are admissible.

Not only Pierre's thinking but his stature as the novel's chief character is made questionable. Undoubtedly, Pierre is a victim of difficult social conditions as a result of which he lost his job and possibly even his partner,⁴³ but in the reader's view these are far from sufficient motives to substantiate his fierce hatred of people. He himself, however, not only sees himself as a victim, but even finds reasons to present himself as a hero who has taken upon himself a mission to avenge the unspecified 'everybody else'. When in one of the early victims of the plague he recognises Jeannette, he does not lament the death of his beloved, or curse his own madness, but pours out his insults at the mob of spectators, and as if he were a God-sent prophet, announces their final doom. In a way characteristic of the manner of narration, the narrator fuses with the hero:

Rudy człowiek podniósł pięść i pogroził nią w kierunku cofających się gapiów.

– Wszyscy powyzdychacie, dranie! – krzyczał ochrypłym, piskliwym głosem, potrzasając w powietrzu pięścią. – Nie było na was kary! Ja jestem wasza kara! To ja wytrułem was jak szczury! Ja ukradłem od Pasteura probówkę z dżumą! Ja zatruliem stacje filtrów! Uciekajcie! Ratujcie się! Nie schowacie się nigdzie!

⁴³ Pierre does not accuse Jeannette of abandoning him, neither does the narrator censure her for her absolute lack of steadfast values. Nevertheless, in the reader's judgement, she is a vain, light-headed and frivolous creature, who took to prostitution to satisfy her capricious needs. Jeannette is actually not introduced in person at all, except in the moment of her death, and there only to emphasise her non-human features.

Tłum w popłochu i przerażeniu odstępował pięćdziesiąt

– Nie uciekniecie nigdzie! Koniec! – ryczał rudy człowiek, wymachując w stronę bulwaru Arago. – Nie powyzdychacie od zarazy – przyjdą tamci, zza murów! Tysiace! Dziesiątki tysięcy! Za mnie! Za moją krzywdę! Za wszystkich! Kamień na kamieniu poważnie zostanie! Dranie! Bydlaki! Ścierwy! (1957:82)

A ginger-haired man rose his fist and shook it in the direction of the retreating gaping crowd.

– You will all rot, you cads! – he shrieked in a raucous, squeaky voice, waving his hand in the air. – There was no punishment for you! I am your punishment! I poisoned you like rats! I stole from the Pasteur [Institute] test-tubes with the plague! I poisoned the filter station! Run! Save yourselves! You won't hide anywhere!

The crowd in terror and panic moved back inch by inch.

– You cannot hide anywhere! The end! – roared the ginger-haired man, waving towards Arago Boulevard. Will you not rot from the pestilence – then they will come, those from beyond the walls! Thousands! Tens of thousands! For me! For my suffering! For everybody! A stone will not remain on a stone after you disappear! Cads! Beasts! Scoundrels!

Pierre is portrayed as a bad actor overdramatising his role, while the motion of his hands and 'raucous, squeaky voice' render him ludicrous. By normal standards of social behaviour, his outburst is unacceptable and has no substance. His exclamation *kamień nie zostanie na kamieniu* ('a stone will not remain on a stone') is taken from the Bible. These are the words spoken by Jesus predicting the destruction of Jerusalem,⁴⁴ too obvious an analogy to be missed even by the most reluctant church-goer. The function of such borrowings from the Bible is to give Pierre the significance of a prophet and to exalt his personal rebellion to the status of a 'cause'. But the leap between Pierre's standing as the character who is responsible for the death of innocent people, and the role he usurps at this point, is plainly absurd; his argumentation is feeble, his attack is monstrous. The question arises, is he himself a monster? He does not have the quality or stature of a true monster, for even the unequivocally diabolic grandeur necessary for the fearful monster is denied him. Thus, Pierre's incomprehensible speech evokes chaos instead of horror. Someone calls for the police, women become hysterical, someone throws a bottle at him and 'blood mixed with wine, the sparkling and foaming stream spouted on the veranda' (82); some

⁴⁴ [I Jezus powiedział] Przyjdą dni, kiedy z tego co widzicie, nie pozostanie kamień na kamieniu, którego by nie rozwalono. [And Jesus said unto them], verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down (Matthew 24:2; Luke 21:6).

consider him mad. The enraged crowd demands his death, calling him ‘a gangster’, ‘a murderer’ and ‘a dog’ (83) which together with the earlier mention of his ‘angry dog-like look’ (81) further undermines his humanity. Eventually he is brutally killed by this bloodthirsty mob:

Pod ciosem trzeciej, celnie wymierzonej flaszki rudy człowiek zachwiał się i chlustając krwią runął na chodnik. Nakryła go fala rozjuszonych ludzi, las podniesionych lasek, szczerk tłuczonych syfonów i przejmujący pisk kobiecy.

Kiedy fala odpłynęła, na trotuarze pozostała nieruchomo spłaszczona, czerwona gomółka. (1957:83)

Under the blow of the third, well-aimed bottle the ginger-haired man staggered and collapsed on the pavement, spouting blood. He was immediately covered by the wave of infuriated people, by the forest of hoisted walking sticks, by the clang of broken siphon bottles and a piercing female scream.

When the wave retreated, a flattened, red piece of stained-glass was left motionless on the pavement.

The scene reiterates the point that even in his death Pierre is denied plausible unequivocal definition – he is neither victim nor hero, nor a monster, nor even a deranged madman, as the narrative deliberately withholds any information which could suggest his madness. He ends as a nameless ginger-haired man – ‘a piece of stained-glass’. Although we feel that his death is deserved, we are not convinced that justice has been carried out, for in the end he dies in a stampede under the feet of a semi-drunk mob consumed by their thirst for blood, not even capable of comprehending the monstrousness of his crime. Some of the novel’s cynicism imparts itself even to the reader, who senses the author’s grimacing at his own creation: the plot has advanced to the point at which the hero can be disposed of. Thus with his death, Pierre loses any credibility as the novel’s protagonist and even the plague in Paris – the only reason thus far for Pierre’s literary existence – is attributed to a chance: ‘the plague left Paris equally unexpectedly as it appeared’ (316).

The continuous onslaught of exactly rendered and rationally motivated details should alarm the reader. With the baggage of historical experience which lies between Jasieński and our generation it is not difficult to see in Pierre the predecessor of certain twentieth-century leaders, to name only Hitler and Stalin, who combined *his* precise way of thinking

and *his* misanthropic hatred of people, adopting it to their own ideologies, with similarly lethal consequences to humanity. All ideological motivations aside, we must realise that the plan of killing all the inhabitants of Paris is born after all in the mind of a mediocre man, if not an outright madman. The implication that the source of Pierre's anger is rooted in social conditions is obscured by the inconclusive nature of his personal suffering, not only because it is based on the ambiguity of the concept of hunger, but because we are uncertain about the protagonist's mental faculties. The novel's logical foundations are thus rendered grotesque not through the intervention of some mysterious or supernatural powers that entirely break the rational relationship of cause and effect, but by showing how easily the motivation of one's deeds can be manipulated and become 'the cause'. Irrespective of the author's intentions, the novel poses the question 'Do ends really justify the means?' and, in a manner typical of the grotesque, leaves to the reader to answer it.

The structure of *I Burn Paris* undermines the significance of the plot of Part I.⁴⁵ The role of the protagonist, the one which determines the plot and theme of Part II, is taken by the plague. Yielding to the epidemic, Paris splits into several 'states', each representing a single idea, such as race, political system, religion, ideology, which gives it an identity.⁴⁶ The absurdity of the situation is conveyed through the grotesque metaphor of the city-crucible:

Rozproszkowani w olbrzymiej kadzi miasta ludzie, w obliczu wszystko niwelującego strychulca śmierci, czepiali się kurczowo, w ślepym pądle odśrodkowym, każdego elementu własnej odrębności, zbijali się jak opłki żelazne dookoła biegunów magnesu,

⁴⁵ The effect of absurdity, in Foster's view, may be achieved through 'a manner of arranging the various elements within the work: 'The arrangement of events into plot may be subjected to illogical (Sternian) divisions into chapters, or to interruptions by separate, sometimes disconnected entities, or digressions. This frequently produces an effect of calamity or of absurdity by obstructing the steady, logical development of the story' (1966:79; parentheses in original).

⁴⁶ This concept is similar to the one in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), the story about the prince Prospero who – hoping to avoid the 'red death' that is the plague raging through the country – withdraws together with his guests into an abbey where he orders to be built seven chambers, each arranged according to a different principle (see *Selected Writings of E. A. Poe*, Cambridge, Mass. 1956). This is to add to all other inspirations Jasieński might have had in writing *I Burn Paris*, summarised by Kolesnikoff 1982:Ch.V).

dookoła świątyń własnego obrządku. Wieże kościołów, cerkwi i meczetu odprowadzały w niebo, jak piorunochrony, rosnący z każdą chwilą magnetyczny prąd odrębności, zbijający rozproszone stado ludzkie w samoistne kompleksy rasowe i religijne. (1957:86)⁴⁷

People pulverised in a huge melting pot of the city facing the all-levelling strickle⁴⁸ of death, now with blind centrifugal velocity were convulsively clinging to every possible element of their own individuality and were gathering around the shrines of their own rites like iron filings around the poles of a magnet. Towers of Catholic and Orthodox churches and mosques were like lightning-rods diverting to the sky an ever-growing magnetic current of distinctness, grouping a dispersed human herd into individual racial and religious complexes.

The Chinese township 'explodes' united by the racial distinctness – the 'pigment of the skin' (86). In similar fashion the Autonomic Republic of Negroes is created in the region of Pigalle and Montmartre, where every white man's head is cut off with 'all the ceremonies taken over from the Ku Klux Klan' (221). The newly established Jewish state – 'the permanent, indissoluble, isolated ghetto' (156) – continues its earlier established cohesive existence based on religion, which the epidemic intensifies even further. Exploiting ideology, the White Russians as well as the French bourgeoisie find common political cause in restoring their respective monarchies, while the Parisian proletariat unites its forces to create the Soviet Republic of Belleville. People of Anglo-Saxon origin enclose themselves in a suburb founded on their 'well known' attraction to capitalism, declaring 'Anglo-American Autonomic Concession' (176). From the theoretical point of view, the metaphor of Paris being a miniature copy of the whole world is given a new meaning as its figurative sense entirely disappears. This 'reified metaphor'⁴⁹ of 'pulverised' Paris exposes the mediocrity of its inhabitants, who focus on details which in their own eyes

⁴⁷ The same paragraph is repeated in the novel again at the end of Chapter II, 1956:153-154.

⁴⁸ A straight piece of wood with which surplus grain is struck off level with the brim of a measure. In Polish the word *strychulec* may be used figuratively in the sense of applying equal measure (Doroszewski *Słownik języka polskiego*, 1966(X):841).

⁴⁹ This particular expression was used by Schoonover (1977:109), while other sources use the term 'enacted metaphor', meaning the literary situation when the figurative meaning of the metaphor is taken in the literal sense.

make them better than others, but which are clearly insignificant in the face of the 'all-levelling' death.

Part II is thus a vivisection of the dying but still pulsating metropolis. However, the purpose of this painful exercise is not to find the cure but to comment on human nature in general. The narrative branches into various side-motifs, diverging into biographical sketches of various characters. An extensive biography of the Chinese revolutionary P'an Tsiang-Kuei is given in greater detail than was Pierre's in Part I, the life story of the Solomin brothers put into hostile camps by the October Revolution is recalled, and the double life of an American businessman, Mr David Lingslay, is exposed. All these digressions push out of the reader's consciousness the issue of the plague; even to Parisians it appears to be little more than a ludicrous creature 'waving playfully with a Red Cross flag from the vehicles passing by' (193). P'an sees the plague as a 'European disease' (154) which motivates his order to eliminate any white person caught on the territory of the 'Independent Yellow Republic'. Seeing the epidemic as a disaster inherent to the 'goy' community, Rabbi Eleazar ben Cwi follows the example provided by the Bible and uses it as an opportunity to isolate the Jews further. Captain Boris Solomin whose life is like 'a sordid German movie' (187) also welcomes the outbreak of the disease as 'a long-awaited cataclysm' (192): after the outburst of the disease, life becomes easier for him, his taxi is requisitioned for an ambulance, the city is less crowded and the 'Russian Imperium' (252) is restored on the territory of Passy. Captain Solomin finds new meaning to life, planning to avenge his personal humiliation he suffered from the Bolsheviks. He is merciless in his persecution of his enemies, Communists and Jews whom he blames for supporting Communism.⁵⁰ The French Monarchy has no individuals; its members – the Parisian bourgeoisie – expect the plague to rejuvenate their squandered revolutionary energy and restore their dissipated moral authority, earned during the 'Great Revolution' (203). The Soviet Republic of Belleville, although it has lost some of its 'best comrades',

⁵⁰ Surprisingly enough, despite his unimaginable cruelty manifested especially in the scene with a young Jew caught with a Soviet passport, Boris Solomin, representing the White Russians, shows a certain humanity. Whether he realises his mistakes or not, his death by suicide proves that he has acknowledged that something went horribly wrong in his life.

also finds the plague ‘useful in a way [for] it cleanses the centre of town and its western suburbs from the bourgeois elements’ (211).

Thus the structural and thematic shift in Part II disarms the horror of life which dominated the plot of Part I and renders it unimportant. It also minimises the heinous nature of the crime committed by Pierre by providing a motivation for it, excusing it – so to speak – by the inferior quality of people inhabiting the world. Everyone is engrossed in sorting out their personal animosities, in pursuing their ludicrous ambitions and passions and they all choose to be oblivious of the epidemic decimating the city. The plague becomes entirely irrelevant, as the reader is more and more persuaded by the narrative that even if the epidemic did not happen, Parisians would either kill one another because of racial or ideological considerations, or commit suicide, or die of hunger or of some other cause, for the world portrayed in the novel has reached such a state of decrepitude that its existence is no longer justifiable. Similarly, it becomes obvious that the partition of Paris is also irrelevant, in the same way as the division of the novel appears irrelevant, for despite all apparent differences, the inhabitants of Paris are all alike in their overwhelming hatred of one another. Pierre, who has died at the beginning of this part, actually continues to live on in all the other characters. The biographic similarities are of lesser importance, although in some cases even these match: almost all the characters have been betrayed by a woman, and almost all are migrants, some like Pierre coming from a small village. The most important element is hatred, the true equalising factor, which like a leitmotif runs throughout the novel, but starts with Pierre:

Pierre zackybał cały i zachłysnął się piekącą nienawiścią [...] Nie! Mało! Cóż znaczy jeden? Tysiąc! Milion! Wszystkich! Miasto! Skąd wziąć tych olbrzymich rąk, tych kilometrowych palców, co objęłyby jednym uściskiem te charczače, pośaldowane gardziele? Wszystkich! Zmięć! Powalić! Upiśsię ich bezsilnym charkotem! Ręce! Skąd wziąć tych rąk? (1957:67)

Pierre wobbled and a burning hatred choked him. [...]

No! Too little! What difference does it make [to kill] one? A thousand! A million! All of them! The city! Where to get such huge hands, such kilometres-long fingers that could squash at once all these wheezing crinkled throats? All of them! To crimp them! To floor them! To get drunk with their helpless wheeze! Hands! Where to get these hands?

Pierre's outburst is unreasonable and unsubstantiated. His misanthropic hatred does not end with words. He intends to give it tangible expression, only he does not yet how. Suddenly, the idea of how to kill masses of people 'illuminates' him, when he remembers the microbes of the plague in the laboratory which he had visited earlier with his friend. He remembers what his friend has been telling him about the plague and realises that there lies the answer:

[...] Chwilę stał jak w ośnieniu, potem zawrócił na miejscu i począł iść z powrotem, ulicami którymi przyszedł, wprost, przez tłum, jak Chrystus stąpający po wodzie, olbrzymi i majestatyczny, jakby niósł przed sobą promienieżącą monstrancję swej nienawiści. (1957:67)

[...] For a moment he stood there as in a revelation, then he turned in place and began to walk back,⁵¹ straight through the crowd, like Christ walking on the water, huge and majestic, as if he carried in front of himself a radiant monstrance of his hatred.

The juxtaposition of Pierre consumed by hatred and obsessed with revenge and Christ – the Biblical epitome of unselfish sacrifice and God's love of mankind – may only be motivated by the laws of the grotesque which, in Bakhtin's words, 'freely blends the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, the spiritual and the material' (1984b:285-286). Such a strategy has a dual rôle: it ridicules the paradigms established by the Bible and mocks their sublime spiritual message, at the same time elevating the malicious actions of Pierre to the level of Divine significance.

The apocalyptic character of the novel is yet another challenge on Jasieński's part to the image of God as the apotheosis of mercy and love of mankind. In *I Burn Paris*, Jasieński puts his own word on the same level with that of God. The 'I' in the title means that the author usurps the power and the rights ascribed in the Bible to God or His prophets. He seems to develop an argument that if God had the right repeatedly to destroy people for not obeying his laws, 'I' as 'the creator' of a literary work have the same right metaphorically to destroy the world which does not comply with *my* standards and re-

⁵¹ Pierre goes back to the laboratory where the microbes of the plague are being kept.

create it according to *my* human principles. Accepting the logic of the Biblical myth, the author consequently takes upon himself the self-imposed poetic mission of destroying God's world which he considers evil, penalising people – irrespective of their creed, ideology, social or material status – with pestilence, famine and war and purifying it with the 'sea of the cleansing blaze' (335).⁵² On its ruins he builds his own ideal world of 'comrade thieves' (331), the world which is based on technology, marked by 'forest of giant aerial masts' (352), 'lorries' and 'factory chimneys' (353), subsistence agriculture and idyllic family life, perfect equality and intensive voluntary labour.

Jasieński deliberately 'plays' with the biblical concept of the Apocalypse and not only by referring to apocalyptic cataclysms, or extensively quoting from the Bible⁵³ but replicating in his novel the intrinsic homogeneity which binds together consecutive stages of the common in Judeo-Christian tradition myth that, in order to be re-created, the evil world must first be destroyed.⁵⁴ The main 'sins' of the Parisians are fornication, and worship of money, that is, worship of other gods (compare Jeremiah 5-6). The main theme of the novel – the destruction of Paris – has the significance of the Deluge ('A small group of prison guards locked up together with prisoners in these unintentional Arks of Noah's on the waves of universal deluge' [321]), and the destruction of Jerusalem, Babylon, and so

⁵² See above footnote 2. It is not my intention to contest the prevailing opinion in respect of the title, but to merely to suggest another angle to it. The title obviously anticipates the content of the novel which, in my view, is intended as a sacrilegious mockery of a prayer popular in Poland: *Od powietrza, głodu, ognia i wojny, zachowaj nas Panie* 'O Lord, save us from pestilence, famine, fire and war'. In this prayer, people express their most basic, archetypal fears, hoping that the almighty power of God will save them from the calamities they name.

⁵³ This especially takes place in chapters where the Jewish sector of Paris is portrayed. Rabbi Eleazar appears to be a kind of modern Moses, who conceives a plan of bribing the French military cordon and chartering a ship to take rich Jews to America. Concealing the fact that they come from the infected Paris, 'the chosen' eventually come to American shores but the ship is bombarded, because Mr David Lingslay who also is on board, realises that it is his civic duty to inform the coast-guards of the truth and to save America from the infection. He pays for his honesty with his life. Because of the extent of references to the Bible, it is impossible to survey them comprehensively in this chapter. However, the topic is interesting; it shows the extent of Jasieński's interest in religion and the complexity of his religious attitudes.

⁵⁴ For a summary of myths based on the cyclical conception of the disappearance and reappearance of humanity see Eliade, 1974.

forth; the morbid tonality of the novel resembles the tonality of passages in the Bible, especially those passages that predict the end of the world. Therefore the landscape of Paris ravaged by the plague resembles that predicted in the Book of Revelation: 'And their dead bodies *shall lie* in the street of the great city' (Revelation 11:8). The dead are burned, as also predicted in the Book of Revelation: 'And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire' (ibid.:20:15). The rebirth of Paris happens also according to the prediction: 'and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' (ibid.:21:4).

Briefly to summarise the treatment of the Apocalypse in *I Burn Paris*, one should realise that the Biblical Apocalypse was meant as the lesson of a loving God to erring humans. It is related as a solemn account of horrors which befall sinners and it affects the reader as a profound tragedy. Jasieński's apocalypse has little to do with love; on the contrary, it betrays a passion for indiscriminate destruction that originates in misanthropic hatred, the sources of which are trivial and grotesquely equivocal. The apocalyptic character of *I Burn Paris* epitomises the fragility of human existence, as if deriding the Biblical myth of salutary powers vested in spiritual identity. The narrator relishes morbid details of decay and agony, relating them with the cynical precision and objectivity of an observer who is unconcerned with the suffering of thousands of inhabitants, frequently deriving perverse pleasure in musing over the aesthetics of the scene rather than admitting its tragic horror, as in the case of the dying Jeannette, for instance.

Moreover, Jasieński uses the 'holy word' of the Bible as a springboard for his persistent mockery of religion:

[...] Nad małymi ołtarzykami stolików pochyleni w nabożnym skupieniu ludzie przyjmowali hostie cielęcych i baranich kotletów pod modlitewny podźwięk talerzy namaszczonych ministrantów-piccolo. (1957:198)

[...] Leaning over the little altars of tables, and to the accompaniment of prayer-ringing plates [in the hands] of solemn⁵⁵ *piccolos*⁵⁶ – altar-boys, people accepted hosts of veal and lamb cutlets with pious concentration.

The restaurant is identified with the church, and a meal with the Holy Sacrament. The iconoclastic character of this fragment is justified by the narrative's insistence that the world contrived in the novel is driven by food and sex only (28). It is an example of what Foster calls 'the downward metaphor' which is typical of the grotesque (1966:78) – the sacred ceremony is downgraded to the commonplace act of dining. The blasphemous character of the whole metaphor is intensified by a sequence of irreverent similes: tables-altars, waiters-alter-boys, host-cutlets, ringing of plates-alter bells, while the mention of veal and lamb meat introduces some warped humour. The function of many such metaphors in the text of the novel is to trivialise religion. In some cases, it is simply an argument developed by one of the characters: 'Christ is a hawker, the oppressors' paid agent' (150). But frequently it is an extensive metaphoric image, where the grotesque is clearly intended by the author, evident in the text and acknowledged by the reader, as in the six-page-long description of a bordello as Eden, where 'obese, swollen bodies' of prostitutes circling among the clouds of cigarette smoke look like angels⁵⁷ on Renaissance paintings. Over the counter is residing the *maître de la maison* – a Budda-like god with puffy, wrinkled face and massive, valuable votive earrings. At some tables there are women in expensive fur coats, they 'looked like sinners on paintings by old masters, in vain trying to hide their burning nudity with the transparent fringe of their flowing hair'. Sometimes a pair is 'rising up the winding, immaterial staircase [...] blessed with a solemn, liturgic gesture by the Budda with the obese female face', then the woman is given 'a symbolic ring of a room-key and a narrow stole of towel' (32-37). These images appear between dream and reality; the narrator's reference to Pierre being drowsy does not resolve the origins of the images, for even when he is awake the narrator continues to

⁵⁵ In the original, the adjective *namaszczeni* is ambiguous; it means both 'solemn' and 'the one that was anointed with holy oil'.

⁵⁶ *piccolo* – Italian for 'small'; here used as 'waiter'.

⁵⁷ Jasieński uses the feminine form of the noun *anielice*.

confuse realms: the fly which constantly buzzes over Pierre's ear is actually one of the prostitutes.

A commonplace vulgarity of the context in which the Biblical or religious imagery is used in the novel undercuts the sublime, awe-inspiring genius of God ever present in the Bible. For instance, the Tower of Babel, which in the Bible signifies the confusion brought by God to people as a punishment for their pride and arrogance,⁵⁸ in *I Burn Paris* is a gargantuan pile of shabby mattresses on top of which, as on an altar, lies Jeannette, the object of the lust of the whole world. The figure of Christ and his love of people is ridiculed in a juxtaposition with the cruel and hateful act of Pierre. Temples of religious worship are desecrated in the metaphoric descriptions of restaurants and houses of ill repute. Jasieński's novel has a strong affinity with the Bible, but he consistently and persistently deforms the sacred religious writ, rendering it grotesque. He 'uses' the biblical myth not to perpetuate or glorify it, but to discredit God and His Divine powers, or to elevate his own heroes – whose only claim to heroism is their mediocrity – to the sublime nobility of Biblical personages.

At the very basis of the apocalyptic grotesque is a sense that all forms of life are undergoing inescapable decay and disintegration. In *I Burn Paris*, real and metaphoric 'walls' are crumbling, moral values disappear, a forceful realisation of the temporal quality of existence makes people madly pursue the pleasures of material life. Such a world is doomed. According to a scholar of myth, most religions believe that 'a universal *ekpyrosis* will absorb the whole universe in fire thus permitting the birth of a new world, an eternal world of justice and happiness [...]'] (Eliade 1974:127). Mocking the myth, Jasieński obeys its laws. The prisoners who survived the plague embrace Communist ideals and the Central Committee of the Party 'is constituted' (325). After 'butchering the prison guards who hid themselves in the attic' (321), they gather the corpses of the plague victims, throw them

⁵⁸ It is believed that the name of the tower originates from the Hebrew word *balal* meaning 'confuse' (*Who's Who in the Bible*, 1994:323).

on gigantic heaps and – as if enacting the prediction in Jeremiah, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter – burn them:

Przez trzy dni na wszystkich wielkich placach Paryża rozbita na ekipy karna armia ludzi o ogolonych głowach wznosiła olbrzymie stosy z mebli i makulatury, na które zwalano trupy. Na czwarty dzień praca była ukończona. Stosy oblano benzyną naftą i podpalono.

Dzień był zupełnie bezwietrny i sąsiadującym budynkom nie groziło żadne niebezpieczeństwo. Ogień czarną spiralą dymu uderzył w niebo, i podpalone niebo, jak dymiąca strzucha runęło nakrywając miasto burą kosmatą czapą (1957:336-337)

For three days on all the squares of Paris, an orderly army of people with clean-shaved heads divided into teams had been erecting huge stacks of furniture and waste paper, on which corpses were piled. On the fourth day the job was finished. The stakes were saturated with petrol and kerosene and ignited.

The day was completely windless and there was no threat of any danger to the neighbouring buildings. The sky was hit by a fire, in a black spiral of smoke. Then the inflamed sky, like a burning thatched roof, crashed, covering the city with its grizzly, shaggy cap.

The landscape of ‘smelling rotting corpses’ evokes in the survivors ‘cold horror’ but no sympathy. Marching through the city, they see ‘everywhere the same picture of a boundless mortuary gazing into the naked sky with the enamel of millions of eyes’ and learn ‘the history of the last six weeks, in all its grotesque terror’ (323). The prisoners’ act of setting fire to the victims’ bodies becomes a cosmic, that is a ‘universal’, event. Even the sky becomes inflamed. There is more than one meaning to this act of conflagration. It cleanses the environment, therefore it is a logical step towards destroying the remaining microbes of the deadly disease. But it is also the act of purging the world of its metaphoric illnesses, both moral and social. The place is now ready to be re-created both physically and metaphorically. In contradiction to the gloomy universe of earlier parts of the novel, the atmosphere of hope and joy is now conveyed metaphorically through the imagery of spring-like weather (325), although the time is specified as September (321). It is an almost perfect reproduction of the mythical paradise, for even ‘the dominion of time’ seems to be suspended (see Eliade 1974:127). On the other hand the spring imagery symbolically alludes to the ‘April Theses’ of Lenin (*ulewa oklasków [...] nawiewała*

kwietniowe reminescencje, 'the downpour of applause blew with reminiscences of April' (325).⁵⁹

Part III portrays the foundations of a future proletarian paradise⁶⁰. Critics, who were deceived by the frequency with which the word 'comrade' is used, declared *I Burn Paris* a utopian novel, or an incarnation of 'revolutionary miracle', disregarding the sketchy and unconvincing portrayal of this 'brave new world' – to use the formulation of Huxley's title⁶¹ – as well as its highly subjective appeal. In most general terms, Utopia is a perfect and ideal world, which usually promises welfare, justice and happiness to all. Even if we accept that each of these terms carries a large degree of arbitrary judgement, a utopian world promises to deliver us from the mundane worries of reality. The utopian universe which emerges in *I Burn Paris* on the ashes of the plague victims takes the semantic relativity of 'perfect' and 'ideal' to the extreme. Imagining the drabness of life in this world of 'comrade thieves', the reader feels oppressed and repulsed by its population, whose chief driving force is hatred of the class-enemy and their emphatic disregard for human life. In other words, not much has changed. The logic which dominates this world is absurdly unsophisticated, for it tries to persuade the reader that crimes were committed mostly out of poverty. The parlance of this Utopia mimics the unrefined style and jargon of the uneducated masses; its grammatical clumsiness is exemplified in the speech delivered by one of the prisoners. Even an attempt to shorten it for the purpose of the quotation did not curtail its original tediousness. However, judging by the applause it received from fellow 'comrade-prisoners', the speaker adequately expressed their convictions and attitudes. We may conclude that he is by no means a solitary case of aberration:

⁵⁹ The document of 7(20) April 1917, in which Lenin formulated his fundamental policy: 'Peace, land, bread, and all power to the Soviets' (see Dziewanowski 1989:89).

⁶⁰ Eliade maintains that the Marxist philosophy of history reiterates the existence of 'the age of gold', but puts it only at the end of history, 'so the militant Marxist of our day reads, in the drama provoked by the pressure of history, a necessary evil, the premonitory symptom of the approaching victory that will put an end to all historical "evil"' (1974:149). See also Sinyavsky 1990:5.

⁶¹ Certain analogies of Jasieński's novel with the famous novel by Aldous Huxley is explored by Rawiński (1968, Ch. III).

– Ja, towarzysze, chciałem rzec słowo względem tych towarzyszy, co to z branży kryminalnej. Będzie między nami, towarzysze, ze trzy tysiące towarzyszy kanciarzy, wypuszczonych z więzień razem z pozostałym proletariatem. My, towarzysze, po sądach ich ciągnąć nie będziemy. Choć to niby i przestępcy, jak to mówią, ale przestępcy, można powiedzieć, przeciwko dawnemu państwu burżuazyjnemu, a kogoż to wtedy nie uważały za przestępca? Nie jeden z głodu, z nędzy, z bezrobocia świsnął gdzie funt kiełbasy albo jenszą szynkę, nie? Takiego zaraz pański, klasowy sąd – bach do ula! Złodziej i tyle. My tam, towarzysze w tych drobiazgach grzebać się nie będziemy. Jak rewolucja, to rewolucja, znakiem tego wolność dla całego proletariatu bez różnicy i wyjątku, nie?

[...] Teraz jesteśmy wszyscy jednacy robociarze, proletariat i kropka. Krasć dobytek ludowy – wara! My, towarzysze, na bawienie się z nimi czasu nie mamy. Władza proletariacka każdy zamach na dobytek komunalny karać będzie bez ceregieli. Niech towarzysze-złodzieje to sobie dobrze zapamiętają! Co było, to było, a od dzisiaj – ani mru-mru! Unas, towarzysze, sądów ani procesów nie trzeba. Złapiemy złodzieja – grabił nasz komunalny majątek – i pod murek go! Nam w policję bawić się nie pilno!

– Dobrze mówi!

[...]

– Chcą po dobroci – roboty huk, a jakże, każdemu straczy. Nie chcą – wolna wola. Pod murek i po krzyku. (1957:330-331)

– Comrades, I wanted to say a word regarding these comrades that are in the line of crime. There are among us, comrades, some three thousand comrade-crooks, freed from the prisons along with the rest of the proletariat. We, comrades, will not drag them through courts. Even if they are – as they say – offenders, they are – we may say – offenders against the former bourgeois state. And whom they didn't consider an offender? More than one pinched here and there a sausage or some ham out of hunger, out of extreme poverty, out of unemployment, isn't it? High-handed, class court immediately – shove him into jug! Thief and that's it. We, comrades, will not rummage through these details. Revolution is revolution, its token – freedom to all the proletariat irrespective and without exceptions, isn't it?

[...] Now we all are all the same workers, proletariat and full stop. To steal common property – hands off! We, comrades, have no time to play with them. Proletarian authorities will punish any attempt [to steal] communal property without further ado. Comrade-thieves must remember it well. What was, it was, but from today – not a word! We, comrades, need no courts, nor lawsuits. We catch a thief, he was stealing our communal possessions, against the wall with him! We are not eager to play the police!

– Hear! Hear! Well put!

[...]

– If they wish – there is plenty of work, if only, there is enough for everybody. If they don't – their choice. Against the wall and it's all over.

Apart from the unrefined language and style, the simplistic thinking of the speaker and his arrogance in respect of human life is very disturbing. It is characterised by total arrogance towards human life ('against the wall and it is all over') and total lawlessness ('we need

no courts, no lawsuits'); it predicts the terror of arbitrary totalitarian dictatorships which were beginning to take shape in Europe.

Bearing in mind that we are not appraising the author's intentions, but the embodiment of his ideas in this novel, we have to conclude that it is difficult to understand why Paris had to be so pitilessly destroyed, but even more difficult to accept is that it has been destroyed in the name of the kind of world portrayed in Part III. By comparison with the overpowering portrayal of the decay in the world in previous parts of the novel, this superficial 'Eden' is a ludicrous pastiche composed of revolutionary songs, mass meeting speeches and propaganda declarations. The life-style of the inhabitants of this 'Eden' is reproduced according to the imagery appointed by Soviet propaganda:

Gdzie niegdyś niezmierzona tafla wysłizganego asfaltu rozpościerała się plac Zgody, od Madeleine do Izby Deputowanych i od Pól Elizejskich do Tuillaryj, pod lekkim podmuchem południowego wietrzyka falował teraz łan dojrzałego zboża. Zboże to żęły właśnie motorowe żniwiarki, prowadzone przez barczystych ogorzałych ludzi w białych koszulach. Mężczyźni i kobiety, w takich samych lekkich ubraniach żniwiarzy, zwinnie podawali snopy na oczekujące auta ciężarowe. Gdzieś niegdyś, na skraju ścierniska, odpoczywające kobiety karmiły piersią niemowlęta.

[...] Przelatując nad parkiem Tuillaryskim, pilot zauważał nim kolonię złożoną z paru tysięcy bawiących się dzieci, w jednakowych ubrankach, fartuszkach i maleńkich czerwonych czapeczkach, przypominającą pole makowe o miedzędz z polem pszenicznym.

Gdzie dawniej rozciągał się Ogród Luksemburski, bielał teraz w słońcu grzędami kalafiorów, szachownicą kolorowych działek, ogromny ogród warzywny. (1957:352-3)

Where once stretched the endless sheet of polished tarmac of the Place de la Concorde – from the Madeleine to the House of Delegates and from the Champs Elysées to the Tuilleries – now, under the light breath of the south wind, waved a field of ripe corn. The corn was just being cut by combine harvesters driven by broad-shouldered, tanned people in white shirts. Men and women, clad in the similar light clothes of harvesters, were agilely passing completed sheaves on to the waiting lorries. Here and there, on the edges of stubble fields, resting women were breastfeeding their infants.

[...] Flying further over the Tuilleries park, the pilot noticed several thousand frolicking children, identically clothed in aprons and tiny red caps. Their colony resembled a field of poppies bordering a field of wheat.

Where once was the Jardin du Luxembourg, now a huge vegetable garden shone white in the sun with its cauliflower patch and its chessboard of colourful beds.

As it is, the picture of pastoral collective happiness so fervently painted here fits the paradigm of the Marxist utopian dream.⁶² Strictly speaking it is not grotesque, for it does not generate in us the inexplicable anxiety typical of the grotesque; everything about this vision seems to be familiar, although overzealously optimistic and naïve in the extreme. However, the landmarks of Paris⁶³ turned metaphorically into collective farms – just a few years before Stalin's policy of collectivisation begun to bear its horrific yield of imprisonment, starvation, and death – remind us of the price paid in the novel for this apparent bliss. Then, our spirits are dampened and the grotesque sets in.

This vision of the future has little allure. Part III may at best be explained as a hasty statement to fulfil the obligation Jasieński felt he had towards the working classes.⁶⁴ In this respect, the novel shows the first symptoms of the split between the artist's creative intuition and his strong feeling of duty towards self-imposed ideological constraints. In the end, both his art and his ideology suffered, for the grotesque diffused the precision of his intentions. In drawing what he might have thought as a positive image of life under the Communist system, he tried to convey its idyllic tranquillity, mutual understanding and selfless devotion to the community, but instead of a convincing and captivating picture, he produced a routine and dull propagandistic poster. Deep down, as the artist of the grotesque, he was interested more in the image he evoked than in the feasibility of endorsing it in reality. Between the first paragraph of the novel: –

Zaczęło się to od drobnego, nic na pozór nie znaczącego wypadku natury zdecydowanie prywatnej.

⁶² See R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. New York 1989, specifically the Introduction and Part I.

⁶³ In the 'true' utopia, the author places his ideal land either in some unknown undiscovered land or in an unspecified future (see Głowiński 1967:435).

⁶⁴ According to Jasieński's own recollections: 'At that time I strongly felt the need to participate actively in the class battles [*klasowych bitwach*] through the compelling weapon of the word of art, which made me dismiss poetry and sit down to prose-writing. The result of three months work was my first prose piece – the novel *I Burn Paris*' (1972:250).

Pewnego pięknego listopadowego wieczora na rogu ulicy Vivienne i bulwaru Montmartre Jeannette oświadczyła Pierre'owi, że potrzeba jej nieodzownie wieczorowych pantofelków. (1957:13)

It all started with a minor, seemingly insignificant incident of a decisively personal nature.

One beautiful November evening on the corner of the Rue Vivienne and Boulevard Montmartre Jeannette informed Pierre that she desperately needed a pair of evening shoes.

– and the events described in Part III, lies the vast unacceptable horror and misery of millions of innocent victims. The question of where Jasieński's own views fit here remains unanswered. The grotesque indeterminacy obliterated his protest against the lack of concern for individual human beings, typical of totalitarian ideologies. It also obscured his support for the need to change. For those who read the novel with an open mind, however, it exposed the banality of evil in the modern world. As Mc Elroy has put it: 'atrocities are perpetrated not by monsters but by mediocrities. The evils of the world arise not from Satanic grandeur but from the millionfold repetition of shabby vices' (1989:18). This point seems to be lost in the existing criticism of the novel which focuses chiefly on the ideological meaning of *I Burn Paris*.

CHAPTER VII

THE SATIRIC GROTESQUES OF BRUNO JASIEŃSKI¹

[...] To be made a laughing stock! After all, laughter is no joking matter.

– It means all respect is destroyed – that's what it means. [...] People have been sent to Siberia for such things.

(Gogol: *Leaving the Theatre...*)

All Jasieński's works discussed in the course of this study express his critical attitude to reality, hence his persistent use of the grotesque to expose progressive social and moral decay in the world. In his poetry as well as in the prose works discussed in the previous chapters, the various references to the feebleness and vulnerability of the human body emblematised the author's dissatisfaction with life infected with the 'lues of civilisation' as he put it in a manifesto. The morbid scenery and dilapidated urban environment² create a background for the grotesque imagery: the 'vomiting statues' in the first poem discussed, the rotting corpses in other poems, the paranormal delusions of the protagonist in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, the lunacy of the protagonist in *I Burn Paris*, and the infectious disease destroying the population of one of the Europe's oldest cities are all part of the apocalyptic grotesque in his works.

The differences between the apocalyptic grotesque and satire are substantial, although both are rooted in dissatisfaction with the world.³ The apocalyptic grotesque is always pessimistic and its genesis is the author's complete disapproval of the world. Moral

¹ Sections of this chapter have been published in *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 51(1), Autumn 1996:30-38.

² Kolcsnikoff speaks of Jasieński's 'brutal urbanism' (1982:54).

³ See Jennings: 'The origins of satire are similar to those of the grotesque. There is a distortion of reality proceeding from the malicious exaggeration of the bad qualities of the thing satirised. This distortion is often of such a kind that its products might inspire fear; but at the same time, it moves towards the end of rendering its targets ridiculous' (1963:60).

bankruptcy corresponds with physical dilapidation. The overall tonality of a grotesque work is morbid and its imagery is incongruously grim or even macabre. In the apocalyptic grotesque, the negative attitude is universal, in that it is directed at people, ideologies, social structures, and nature, as is evident in Jasieński's *I Burn Paris*; there is no gleam of hope unless this universe is completely destroyed to make way for new life. The satirist, on the contrary, is an optimist, for through his work he hopes to reform the world. That is why he identifies certain aspects of reality – whether in the sphere of politics, organisation of society or in human behaviour – with the single purpose of ridiculing it so that people will be inspired to strive for change. As a rule satire presupposes the existence of the ideal and prompts society or people as individuals to try to start afresh. The effectiveness of satiric work lies in the clarity of its satiric targets and in the possibility of decoding the ideal, which itself might not appear in the work. As Peter Petro notes in his study of modern satire, 'the satiric target has a model, an ideal counterpart: a Platonic ideal, or its approximation in reality' (1982:17).⁴ Apart from the notion of 'the ideal', Petro also introduces the notion of 'a moral norm', inherent in satire, using Frye's general formulation that '*the norm makes the satire satiric*'. While establishing 'the norm' as well as 'the ideal' is the responsibility of the reader, the satirist is obliged to make its identification possible (ibid.:17-20, emphasis in original).

The widest understanding of satire is found in Petro. He defines satire as an 'umbrella' term that designates various 'sub-genres' whose common essence is in '*criticism*' (alternatively called 'censure' or 'attack') and '*humour* of the widest possible variety (from wit to black or gallows humour)' (ibid.:8; emphasis in original). Petro believes that satire can take any form and exist to any degree. It can be both an element in the work conferring on it 'satiric "colouring" [or] a satire, a genuine literary form, possessing its own "peculiar power"' (9). Among the 'devices' which interact with satire, Petro mentions irony, parody, caricature and the grotesque, accepting that the grotesque frequently permeates modern satire as is apparent in the works of Günter Grass, Evelyn Waugh, Nathaniel West and Franz Kafka (13-14).

⁴ *Modern Satire: Four Studies*. Berlin, 1982.

Only a few scholars refuse to accept the relationship of the grotesque and satire as possible. The prominent Russian Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum is one of those who believe that the satiric intent contradicts the grotesque.⁵ Jennings, on the other hand, begins a long list of those who advocate the view that 'the satirical orientation of the work does provide fertile soil for the grotesque' (1963:60). Kayser also notes that 'satire [...] has much in common with the grotesque and may even help to pave the way for it'.⁶ The prominent Russian scholar of the grotesque, Yury Mann, accepts that in certain works the grotesque may be 'subordinated to the [...] satirical purpose' (1970:141).⁷ He points out that

Literature – especially satiric literature – worked out the most subtle ways to substantiate [the use of] the grotesque, one of which is the transfer of the fantastic to prosaic, everyday reality [as was the case] with Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* where the most unbelievably fantastic events are combined with a rational and detailed description of the place and time of the action, the adduction of dates and sizes all leading to its supremely comic pedantry. (1966:97)

Mann is preoccupied at this point with the device itself, but one can easily guess the function he ascribes to the grotesque in a satiric work, that of a tool in revealing vices in 'the prosaic'. Mann believes that 'the grotesque is written not to hide, but to expose' (ibid.:122). It has to be stressed, however, that his assumption is admissible only when grotesque is viewed as one of the devices, and does not challenge the objectives of satire *per se*, for the non-satiric grotesque is as much expert in *revealing* as it is in *concealing*.

⁵ See Eikhenbaum's essay 'Как сделана шинель Гоголя' (originally published in 1918); here quoted from 'How Gogol's *Overcoat* is Made', transl. J. F. Beebe, in *Gogol's 'Overcoat': An Anthology of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Trahan. Ann Arbor, 1982:32.

⁶ Kayser obviously draws a distinction here between the grotesque as a device and a phenomenon, although he does not define what he means by 'phenomenon'. Nevertheless, he notes: 'Taken as a phenomenon, [...] the grotesque is clearly distinguished from humorous caricature and topical satire, no matter how broad the transitions from one to the other and how difficult, at times, the distinction between them' [1981:37].

⁷ In his more substantial study *On the Grotesque in Literature*, Mann rejects the use of the grotesque in 'whimsical fantasies' and literature of the absurd, firmly believing that 'only on the fertile soil of humanitarian ideas and social criticism is it possible to preserve and develop the traditions of the grotesque in literature' (1966:157), which reinforces my perception of his view as limiting the grotesque to its use in satire.

Harpham makes this characteristic of the grotesque a basic premise of his book, saying: 'Beneath this study is the implication that serious attention to the grotesque might unlock many secrets' (1982:21). It means, that the grotesque text may easily become 'a mask' concealing the viewpoint of the author, and this is where its use by the satirist becomes problematic.

Nevertheless, satirists reach for the grotesque frequently. Justifying this phenomenon, Thomson notes:

The satirist may make his victim grotesque in order to produce in his audience or readers a maximum reaction of derisive laughter and disgust; and a grotesque text, on the other hand, will frequently have a satiric side-effect or score satirical points, naturally enough when one considers that the grotesque by its very nature is aggressive and aimed at discomfiting in some way. (1972:41-42)

However both Thomson (*ibid.*:41-47) and Petro (1982:132) warn that the relationship between satire and the grotesque must be approached with caution. The purpose of satire is to criticise and, although this criticism does not necessarily have to be made explicit, the reader should be able to point out the individual, group, institution, custom, belief or idea that is being subjected to attack. The reader alone must be able to see in the fictional constructs of a satiric work the phenomena of the real world that are being criticised. For the satire to achieve its effect, its targets must be readily identifiable in contemporary reality. This is the condition insisted upon by Petro, who argues that 'the illusion of fiction is inevitably dispelled as the reader recognises the satiric target' (*ibid.*:17). The grotesque relies on both the illusion of fiction and the illusion of reality. It confuses the real world with the illusory to the extent that we are unable to separate one from another, because, by definition, the chief objective of the grotesque work is to demonstrate that fiction and reality may be one. Moreover, the grotesque renders values ambiguous and puts the emphasis on the universal incongruity of the world. This quality of the grotesque undermines the explicitness of targets demanded by satire. The grotesque obscures the directness and direction of the attack, defeating the unequivocal didactic aims inherent in satire, for 'the grotesque writer does not analyse and instruct in terms of right and wrong,

or true and false, nor does he attempt to distinguish between these'. Thus, although the grotesque helps the satirist to awaken the reader's attention to problems by casting a profoundly disquieting light over the portrayed universe, care must be taken, warns Thomson, that 'the nonplussing, disorienting and generally overwhelming effect of the grotesque' will not surpass 'the didactic point which the author of satire wishes to make' (1972:42).

The purpose of satire is not only to criticise but also to ridicule vice. The power of laughter is widely accepted. Zamiatin, the author of the well-known dystopia *Мы* ('We') put it in a cogently militant metaphor in speaking of 'blasting life with the smile – the most deadly of dynamites' ([...] *взрывание жизни старшнейшим из динамитов – улыбкой* [1967: 237]). The issue of humour is much too wide for this brief analysis of the complex relationship between satire and the grotesque. However, a point needs to be made in respect of the potential contradiction between the purpose ascribed to humour in each of the modes concerned. It has already been noted that the objective of satire is to ridicule targets identified as deserving contempt. Thus in order to be effective, satire on the one hand relies on laughter while on the other it aims to evoke anger and disgust but, as Thomson perceptively points out, satire 'aims to produce these separately' (1972:42). The grotesque – as illustrated earlier in the course of this study, and as emphatically pointed out by scholars, including Thomson – 'produces a confusion of reaction' (*ibid.*:42), or as Harpham puts it, grotesques 'almost always inspire ambivalent emotional reactions' (1982:8). Thus, although the grotesque is a powerful weapon which makes ridicule possible, care must be taken by a satirist to ward off the unsettling effect grotesque humour might have on his work. Thomson elucidates this important point:

Normally in satire there is an alternation, or at least a distinction, between the ludicrous smallness which excites derisive laughter and the gross evil which arouses anger. The grotesque writer would present ludicrous smallness and gross evil as being one, indistinguishable, and strive for a reaction in which laughter and anger figure simultaneously and with equal force. (1972:42)

In this chapter I intend to analyse the effect of the grotesque on those of Jasieński's works that are known as satires. In the first of the works discussed, the play *Бал манекенов* ('The Ball of the Mannequins')⁸ the switch from apocalyptic grotesque to satire seems to be inhibited by the author's pessimistic outlook and his negative attitude to the world in which he lives. Thus, although he expressly states his intention to 'deride Western Social Democracy' (Jasieński 1972:253), his objectives are thwarted by the difficulty the reader experiences in identifying the play's unequivocal satiric targets, as well as by the lack of any guidance towards 'the ideal' or the moral 'norm'. With more control Jasieński applies the grotesque in his later stories *Главный виновник* ('The Chief Culprit') and *Hoc* ('The Nose'), the former intended as an anti-militarist satire and the latter as an attack on the racial prejudice adopted as the principal ideology of Nazism. But even in these two short stories the distinctness of 'the norm' is impeded by grotesque ambivalence. Frequently the impression is overpowering that the text is just a mask for the author who relies on the reader to decode in it the author's own fear that his ideals have dissipated in the incongruities of life in the Stalinist version of utopia.

⁸ *Бал манекенов*. Пьеса в 3-х актах. М-Л. 1931. The introduction was written by Lunacharsky. According to Matsuev's bibliographic dictionary (see footnote 10) it was described as 'new publication of foreign literature' in the sphere of 'Satire. Bourgeoisie. Europe.'

The Ball of the Mannequins⁹

...those wooden dolls which are called people.
(Gogol, in an unpublished diary)

[...] What does this play have to offer? First of all, there is no plot, neither is there any action, there is a total absence of any argument, it's full of absurdities and then again, all the characters are caricatures.

(Gogol: *Leaving the Theatre...*)

The Ball of the Mannequins appeared in 1931 as Jasieński's first Soviet publication, in an edition of 5 000 copies, insignificant by Soviet standards.¹⁰ Its manuscript was never found, thus its original language of composition is not known. Stern (1969:212-213), Stępień (1974:26), Gerould (1977:45),¹¹ among others, maintain that the play was Jasieński's first attempt at writing in Russian. Stern, on whom other scholars have relied, based his opinion on the quality of the language in the play which he finds 'rigid and limited to the most common Russian idioms'. A different view is expressed by Dziarnowska (1982:258 and 263), who maintains that *The Ball of the Mannequins* was originally written in Polish and that Jasieński translated it into Russian only later with the help of Anna Berzin, his wife. Dziarnowska believes that the play was conceived and written during Jasieński's stay in France, and was intended for a French audience.¹² Jasieński himself implied that by 1931 he was already able to write in Russian (in Jaworski

⁹ In this study reference is made to 'Bal Manekinów' published in Polish, translated from Russian by Anatol Stern, in: Bruno Jasieński. 'Nogi Izoldy Morgan' i inne utwory poetyckie. Warszawa, 1966:117-209. In this section, all quotations from this source are indicated by the page number only.

¹⁰ N. Matsuev, *Три года советской литературы. Библиографический указатель*. Москва, 1934 ('Three Years of Soviet Literature. Bibliographic Directory').

¹¹ D. Gerould, (ed. and transl.), *Twentieth-Century Polish Avant-Garde Drama*. Ithaca, 1977.

¹² Dziarnowska refers to a letter written by Jasieński to a friend, where he admits that he has been thinking of a 'thing for the theatre' and expresses the hope that if acclaimed in Paris, such a play would contribute to his success in Poland (1982:164). The information is corroborated by Lubelski, who names the friend as Mikułko (1973:81). The correspondence took place in 1926 (see Jaworski 1995:42).

1995:171, 176), while the first bibliographical source available on the subject refers to *The Ball of the Mannequins* as the 'new release of a foreign book', confirming its reception in the Soviet Union as a non-Russian production. There is no conclusive evidence at this stage to resolve the dispute, but the language of *The Ball of the Mannequins* is, indeed, awkward and stilted in places, a far cry from Jasieński's usual 'colourful and "muscular" style', as Stern puts it (1969:213).

Rimma Volynska, in her analysis of *The Ball of the Mannequins*, writes that it 'is a thoroughly avant-garde work' (1994:379). Indeed, the genesis of the play can clearly be traced as far back as *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* where Jasieński created an inhospitable universe that sanctions the independent functioning of dismembered body parts and the conscious existence of inanimate objects, and where people are no different from automata. The action of *The Ball of the Mannequins* is set in Paris during a carnival night and is presented in three acts: Act I takes place in a tailor's parlour, Acts II and III in the mansion belonging to the Parisian automobile manufacturer, Arnoux. The satire of the play rests on the derisive analogy that 'politicians are puppets'. This common figurative expression is literally enacted in the play when the actual politician is replaced by a mannequin. The play is thus both satiric and grotesque.

Thematically the play draws on Jasieński's Parisian experience, mostly of the world of fashion on which he reported in his letters to *New Era*. It expresses the same critical attitude to the world of the sated, but instead of 'burning it', as he did in *I Burn Paris*, he ridicules its vices. As in his previous works, Jasieński creates a universe ruled by its own intrinsic logic of the grotesque which abolishes common sense, rejects the laws of nature and confuses perspectives. Especially powerful grotesque effect is achieved by obliterating the distinction between puppets, that is, the mannequins, and the humans – both being played by human actors. Moreover, Jasieński limits the universe of the play by setting it on a carnival night which, in the words of Jennings, 'often serves as the background for a grotesque situation, partly because of its affinity for freaks and monstrous masked figures and partly because of its radical departure from the conventions

of everyday life, its creation of a fantastic world in which standards of identity and seriousness no longer apply' (1963:20).

The opening setting shows a fashion salon, where mannequins gather to hold their annual ball.¹³ The conspicuous grotesque explores the external semblance between mannequins and human bodies.¹⁴ The mannequins are ideally suited to represent human bodies; they talk and hear, walk and dance to the tango and jazz music heard from the floor below, where human beings are also holding their carnival ball. The fact that the mannequins are 'brought to life' led to the notion of 'fantastic grotesque' in the existing criticism of the play.¹⁵ Although the 'fantastic' element is indeed strongly evident in the opening scenes, there is no doubt that the action takes place in Paris, the fashion capital of the world. A number of fashion salons are mentioned (Barclay's, Soulc, Alby, Esder (124))¹⁶, as well as Avenue Kléber (126), and the prevailing fashion trends ('flat women' (126)). There are also references to urban landmarks and constant references to people, all of which place the action firmly within reality as we recognise it, and this is what makes the play grotesque: the fusion of the fantastic and the real. If the mannequins were to exist in a world that bears no relation to ours, even if they possessed all our human characteristics, their grotesqueness would have to be re-evaluated. In this play, however, the mannequins exist only because they occupy the same realm as human beings.

The universe of mannequins is very similar to the universe which we perceive as human beings. Thus the mannequins are male or female dummies of various sizes, by which they

¹³ Jennings notes that 'The characteristic motion of the grotesque object is that of dancing, since this is the activity most calculated to call forth fear alongside amusement [...]; the monster parades itself before us for our contemplation.' (1963:19).

¹⁴ See Kayser: 'Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes and automata [...]' (1981:183).

¹⁵ For example, Stern 1969:216. Kolesnikoff too notes Jasieński's use of 'the fantastic and the extraordinary' (1982:117), while Volynska speaks of 'the fantastic circumstances [which allow the action to develop] according to an inner logic' (1994:384).

¹⁶ That we are unable to identify these salons today makes no difference; names in general, whether authentic or not, create the illusion of reality.

are identified, although 'in place of heads, they have metal rods typical of tailor's dummies' (123).¹⁷ Some lack hands or legs, which not only places them on the lowest level of their social ladder, but considerably enhances the humorous aspect of the play:

Manekin Męski 4 (zwraca się do wchodzącego): *Jak się masz, 44? Cóż się stało z 42?*
Czy zabrakło nóg, że musiałeś go dźwigać pod pachą?

Manekin Męski 3: *Żebyś wiedział, że zabrakło. Na całą pracownię przysłano tylko trzy pary. Z rękoma jakoś daliśmy jeszcze sobie radę, chociaż też trzeba było sztukować damskimi. (pokazuje jedną ze swoich rąk) A nóg dla niego zabrakło. Biedaczysko, tak się szykował na dzisiejszy wieczór, tak się stroił – i masz ci los. Został bez nóg, i co tu było robić? Prosił, żeby go nie zostawiać samego, żeby go wziąć ze sobą. Mówi: chociaż w kąciku postoję, popatrzę, jak inni chodzą i tańczą. Żał mi się go zrobiło. Zarzuciłem go sobie na plecy i przywlokłem tu. Niech sobie biedak stoi i patrzy. Wiadomo, markotnie by mu było w pustej pracowni. A może się tu znajdzie jakąś para zbytecznych nóg? (1966:127)*

Male Mannequin 4 (*turning to the one entering the room*): How are you, 44? What happened to 42? Doesn't he have legs that you had to carry him under your arm?

Male Mannequin 3: You've guessed right. In the whole shop we only had three pairs. We managed with hands somehow, even though we had to help ourselves to the female ones. (*he shows one of his hands*) But legs were in short supply. Poor thing, he was looking so much forward to this evening – and now you have it. He was left without legs, so what should I have done? He begged me not to leave him all alone, to bring him along. He said: At least I will stand in the corner and watch how others walk and dance. I felt sorry for the lad, so I put him on my shoulders and dragged him here. Let the poor thing stand and look. It would certainly be lonely for him in the shop. Maybe here we might find a spare pair of legs for him?

According to the flexible rules of grotesque logic, it is impossible to dance or walk without legs. However, it is perfectly possible to speak or see without a head. This notwithstanding, all the mannequins express their utmost envy of those among them that already have heads and look like human beings. These are the high society mannequins, used only in the most elegant salons. Thus the social structures of the created universe of dummies mirror the social divisions of the real world of humans as we know it. The mannequins are also aware of social tension in the human world, they talk about strikes

¹⁷ This particular line is taken from the stage directions, which are here considered an intrinsic part of the text as an object of study. See Markiewicz, who speaks of the double nature of a dramatic text: 'the only constant invariable form of the existence of a play'. While it serves the live theatre, the text of a play remains a literary work ('Drama and Theatre in Polish Theoretical Discussions'. *Literary Studies in Poland*. Wrocław, 1986:19).

and negotiations between workers and proprietors. However, as the mannequins see it, there is little possibility of relief for them; whatever may happen in the human world, the mannequins' destiny remains the same – they will remain 'nailed to the floor' (125). Humans are their true oppressor.

Whenever the mannequins begin to talk about humans, they switch to the jargon of social struggle. Their ultimate goal is to be free to move around like people. They are indignant that humans might learn about their gathering and put an end to 'this little bit of freedom' by nailing them to the floor for good (134). The mannequins fear human beings, but even more they hate and despise them, believing that people are their imperfect copies, having nothing to offer:

Manekin Męski 6: Nie wierzę, aby można się było czegoś nauczyć od ludzi. Napatrzyłem się już dosyć tym przyjeżdżającym do nas elegantom. Przecież to tylko nasze nędzne kopie. Śmiać mi się chce, kiedy się patrzy na tych połamańców. Ze skóry wprost wyłazą, aby garnitury leżały na nich tak samo idealnie jak na nas. A jak grymaszą, ile mają pretensji, że to co na nas leży jak ułał, na nich marszczy się i fałduje. Te pokraki każą krawcom ślećceć całymi nocami i wypychają wata to czego im brak, byle tylko mieć figury podobne do nas. Nie pojmuję doprawdy, po co im właściwie oddają nasze ubrania? Przecież tak czy inaczej będą w nich wyglądały tragicznie. I pomysłem tylko, że to stado pawianów, które na próżno usiłują stać się podobnymi do nas, może swobodnie spacerować i jeździć sobie od rana do wieczora, gdzie tylko dusza zapragnie, podczas gdy my przez całe życie musimy sterczeć na jednym miejscu. (1966:128-129)

Male Mannequin 6: I doubt one can learn anything from people. I have seen enough of those swells who visit us. They are nothing more than pathetic copies of us. I feel like laughing when I look at those cripples. They would do anything just to be able to wear their suits the way we do. And how finicky they are, how unhappy when something that fits us perfectly hangs and creases on them. Those cripples force tailors to sweat at night over their clothes, substituting with cotton wool what their bodies lack, only to achieve the perfect fit, resembling ours. I actually don't understand why they give them our clothes. Either way they look horrible in them. And to think that this herd of baboons who in vain try to mimic us can freely walk and drive wherever they please from morning to night, while we are forced to remain in one place!

The mannequins worship only the perfect body. In their world of fantastic 'appearances', appearance is everything. The mannequins view the world from their narrow 'dummy' perspective. Thus they laugh with disgust at human beings' vain efforts to have figures as

perfect as theirs. The real sense and fullness of life elude them completely. Their own existence depends on the changes in vogue:

Manekin Damski 2 (melancholijnie): *Kto z nas ma przed sobą jeszcze kilka lat życia? Moda zmienia się dziś tak szybko! Mówią, że płaskie figury będą już w przyszłym roku niemodne. Znów stają się modne kobiety o wyraźnie zaznaczonym biuście. Jeżeli to prawda, to w przyszłym roku pójdziemy wszystkie na złom.*

Manekin Męski 2: *No a cóż się stanie w takim razie z płaskimi kobietami? Przecież prawie wszystkie kobiety są teraz płaskie! Więc i one pójdą na złom? A skąd wezmą inne? Przecież ludzi nie majstruje się tak szybko, jak nas. Wyjaśnił mi to kiedyś szczegółowo rozmiar 42.*

Manekin Damski 2: *Prawdopodobnie niektóre kobiety także pójdą na śmieci. Słyszałam, jak nasza właścicielka mówiła to o jednej klientce z avenue Kléber tylko, że u ludzi odbywa się to chyba jakoś inaczej. Widziałam, jak ta sama klientka przyjeżdżała potem jeszcze nie raz i zamawiała nowe toalety. Tak, z pewnością wszystkich płaskich kobiet nie wyrzucą. Kobiety można przerabiać. Mówią, że są nawet jakieś specjalne pracownie czy fabryki, gdzie przerabia się je zupełnie na nowo. Zależnie od mody, obciosuje się je lub przykleja się im brakujące części.* (1966:125-126)

Female Mannequin 2 (with melancholy): Who among us will still be alive in a few years time? The fashion changes so fast! They say that flat figures will go out of fashion next year. Females with fuller chests are in vogue now. If this is true, we all will be thrown away as rubbish.

Male Mannequin 2: Well, what will happen to the flat women then? Most of them are flat! Will they also be sent to the rubbish heaps? Where will they find new ones? You know that people are not made as fast as we are. Size 42 once explained this to me in detail.

Female Mannequin 2: Probably some women will be sent to rubbish bins. I've heard our Madame saying this about one of her lady customers from Avenue Kléber. But I believe it's a bit different with people. I've seen this lady again and she ordered many new dresses. I'm positive that not all the women will be thrown out. They can be redone. There are special workshops or factories, you know, where they remake people so they look like new. Depending on the vogue, they are chopped into shape or fitted with the lacking parts. [...].

Mannequins see human beings only as a form, a bodily shell, and their evaluation of humankind is based exclusively on outward appearance – on the figure and the attire. The mannequins' view of the world is narrowed to their own limited experience of life, which they dogmatically take as the only real experience. Their hatred towards human beings is disquieting because the reasons for this hostility are ludicrous. The common-sense point is that the mannequins are made by people to display garments in shop windows, not to

indulge in revolutionary rhetoric. Their rebellion would be hilariously funny if it were contained only in the satiric comedy, ridiculing human vanity or envy. Instead, Jasieński insists on investing the action with a sinister struggle for control and on alluding to the puppets as 'oppressed', which leaves us – humans – to be the oppressors.

The dramatic tension of the play intensifies in Scene 6, when a human being, initially called 'Man', enters the stage. He was on his way to the ball when on the poorly lit street he noticed a perfect female figure and could not resist the temptation of making her acquaintance.¹⁸ The 'figure' was the headless Female Mannequin in the Fur Coat, who wrapped herself in a shawl so as 'not to appear different from other women on the street' (130). In this way, he intrudes on the mannequin ball. Initially the man is stupefied by the uncanny sight of a room full of creatures resembling humans but without heads. Since they talk and move, however, he assumes that he has come to a carnival masquerade. He compliments the hosts on this conspicuously original idea. But the mannequins are horrified that their enemies, humans, will learn their secret. They hastily arrange a trial, calling upon the four of the 'bigger sizes' ('According to our custom, the matter will be considered by bigger sizes' [133]) to form the court, composed of three judges and one prosecutor.

The action initially develops as a ludicrous farce: a human being is being judged by a court of mannequins. But the mannequins are vengeful and very serious, not in the least aware of their own ludicrousness. The ominous atmosphere intensifies when we realise that the puppets do not seek justice but the 'final solution'. Human life means little to them. As the Female Mannequin 1 puts it, human beings are not the obstacle, 'there is always a way to

¹⁸ Here the influence of Gogol is apparent, especially his story *Nevsky Prospekt*: at night, when lamps are lit, 'in narrow shop windows appear things which do not dare to show themselves during the day'. In the deceptive lights of the city the beauty happens to be a prostitute, as Piskarev discovers and which leads to his death (he cuts his throat) (1936:220-230). In the play, the beauty is a mannequin, as the Leader discovers (and his throat is also cut). Equally strong is the similarity with Jasieński's own story *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* where Berg's life is destroyed because of his fascination with Isolda's legs. The Leader is also trapped because he is obsessed with the 'marvellous legs' of the Female Mannequin in the Fur Coat (130).

kill them' (124). When no legal defence is provided for the accused, the reader has a right to question the legitimacy of this court. But the mannequins are guided by their own reasoning: they only have this one night for their pleasure and they are determined not to waste it on boring deliberations. The act of indictment is prepared *ad hoc* and rests on the charge of 'unwelcome intrusion', that is, on the fact that the accused has 'spoiled these few hours of freedom' (134) which the mannequins have won through cunning and the transgression of human laws. The revolutionary jargon in which the mannequins confer, in addition to their view of themselves as oppressed, makes us recall Pierre from *I Burn Paris*, the self-appointed saviour of humanity. While in Pierre's case extenuating circumstances for his action could be established (unemployment and a broken heart), with the mannequins the extenuating circumstances are irrelevant from the point of view of objective logic because they are only mannequins, that is objects, and their 'fate' leaves us, as humans, emotionally indifferent.

The 'political' satire¹⁹ seems to take shape as the man's identity as an influential Leader of the Social Democratic Party is revealed by Male Mannequin 1 who refers to him as 'Mr Deputy' and 'a leader, one of the best customers'. Hearing this Male Mannequin (size) 50 inquires: 'What, what did you say? The Leader? Is it his surname?' (135). The Leader, trying to persuade his oppressors to let him free, relies only on his position:

Leader: [...] Zrozumcie panowie, chodzi o poważną sprawę. Jutro w przemyśle samochodowym ma wybuchnąć strajk. Rozumiecie, panowie, sami, że jako przywódca partii robotniczej nie mogę tracić ani chwili czasu. [...] (1966:138)

Leader: [...] You must understand, gentlemen, that it is a serious matter. Tomorrow a strike could be proclaimed in the motor car industry. Surely you understand that as a leader of the worker's party I have no time to waste. [...]

¹⁹ The political aspect of satire in the play has been consistently noted by critics. Kolesnikoff, for instance, referring to Lunacharsky's appraisal of the play, notes 'fantastic as an excellent means of transmitting political satire' (1982:120), while Volynska notes that in this play 'prevailing grotesque elements are blended with biting political satire' (1994:379).

Introducing him, Male Mannequin 1 focuses exclusively on the physical aspects of his appearance, unintentionally revealing a psychological portrait of a self-centred and vain individual: 'He has sloping shoulders, and they make shoulder pads for his jackets. He is wearing a black silk corset. He tries on each suit at least three times, always finding at least fifteen flaws [...]’ (136). Eventually The Leader’s extensive wardrobe, and his habits of acquiring it, are disclosed. We learn that apart from his expensive suits, once every four years the Leader has one suit made in haste and without any fitting. This suit is made of cheap material, for it is to be worn during the Leader’s election campaign. This piece of information explicitly reveals the Leader to be a skilful political manipulator, the characteristic that is crucial in creating an ambivalent emotional response in readers, whose sympathy for the man facing imminent death at the hands of dummies is countered by a growing dislike for the hypocrite. Clearly, by pretending that he is badly dressed the Leader projects the image of a poor man – ‘one of the people’ – and exploits the sentiments of his electorate. Generally, however, the satiric point is diluted by its grotesque ambivalence. If the oppressed masses judge their leaders only by their looks – in the same way as the mannequins judge humans – namely, by what they seem to be and not by who they really are – then they deserve the leaders they have. The viewer’s sympathy is not with the mannequins, nor with the Leader, nor even with the oppressed masses, because in this play they are represented by mannequins, whose misfortunes, as already noted, leave us unmoved. The mannequins are artificial objects with no life or will of their own; they are not capable of commitment nor are they fit to experience emotions. They are made merely to imitate the shape of a human body and some of its movements when animated by a person or by artificial means.

The qualification of the play as ‘political’ satire unnecessarily limits the scope of its social criticism. Moreover the play’s ‘politics’ are constantly confused by a grotesque ambiguity about who exactly are the victims and who are the oppressors, for in the grotesque universe these categories are never constant. In *The Ball of the Mannequins* the incessant grotesque ‘swapping of categories’ is very prominent. Readers are not able wholeheartedly to commiserate with the victims or despise the oppressors simply because either they are not identifiable or they are one and another at the same time. While the implication that

the puppets represent the oppressed (mannequins-workers) and human beings the oppressors (people-bourgeoisie) is entirely unacceptable from our human perspective, 'politically' the concept is not only ineffective but semantically dangerous, because it clearly suggests that the masses have no will of their own and can act only if manipulated by external forces. We may also consider the possibility of identifying the 'oppressed' with the headless, and the 'oppressors' with those who have heads, as reflected in social structures both in the mannequins' own universe and in the world of humans. Because it is a grotesque play, at all times we have to be aware of this very 'play' with the interpretative possibilities that Jasieński imposes on us – the readers and the spectators – clearly implying that his ambitions were greater than simply to write 'a grotesque play [...] which derides contemporary Western social democracy [...], a revolutionary farce', as he admitted in his autobiographical sketch (1972:253).

Consequently when the trial ends with the unanimous verdict to chop off the Leader's head, we are astounded. He is a lustful hypocrite, but the punishment far exceeds his guilt, and considering the fraudulent court procedure – there has been no balance between the accusing and defending parties – we are not convinced that the ends of justice have been served. Moreover, the question, 'Whose side we are on?' seems legitimate. Why should we sympathise with the mannequins rather than with our own kind? Even if we agree that the Leader is a despicable manipulator, is the radical verdict the correct outcome of what we have seen as a comedy of circumstances? The mannequins have no time to waste, however, and the sentence is to be carried out immediately, without giving the accused any chance of speaking in self-defence. The court procedure is manifestly a mere farce, a manoeuvre acted out with the sole purpose of satisfying a convention – a puppet show in its true sense. However, if the play is to be regarded as satire, what is the point of this ludicrous procedure? What courts are being ridiculed if this is the court of the play's 'oppressed'?

There is a similar lack of clear 'political' satiric direction and motivation in the scene of the Leader's execution, where rampant grotesque takes over. The visual presentation of the play creates an excellent opportunity to involve its spectators and make them feel the

pinch of the play's grotesque horror – grotesque because it is presented in a scene which aims to make the audience laugh. The following are the stage directions:

(Na środek sceny wchodzi Manekin Męski 6 z nożycami i Manekin-Sędzia z ogromnym żelazkiem. Ustawia szeroko otwarte nożyce w ten sposób, że opierają się o podłogę jednym uchem i jednym ostrzem. Manekin Męski 6 trzyma nożyce za górne ucho. Manekin Męski 3 podtrzymuje górne ostrze nożyce. Manekin-Sędzia stoi w pogotowiu z żelazkiem.

[...] Manekiny-Strażnicy chwytają Leadera pod ręce i wloką go na środek sceny w kierunku otwartych nożyce.

[Leader] próbuje rozpaczliwie się wyrwać, podczas gdy manekiny ściągają z niego palto. [...] wyrywając się, szarpnął z całej siły za rękę jednego z manekinów-szczepników. Ręka pozostała w dłoni Leadera. Wstrząśnięty, wypuszcza rękę, która z hałasem pada na podłogę.

Manekin-Strażnik pochyla się, podnosi swoją rękę i spokojnie zaczyna ją sobie przymocowywać.) (1966:139-140)

(Male Mannequin 6 comes to the middle of the stage, holding a pair of scissors and Mannequin-Judge appears with a huge iron. They position the pair of scissors widely open in such a way that one eye and one blade rest on the floor, while Male Mannequin 6 holds the top eye of the pair of scissors and Male Mannequin 3 holds the top blade. Mannequin-Judge waits with the iron.

[...] Mannequins-Guards drag the Leader to the centre of the stage towards the scissors, holding him under his arms.

[...] He desperately struggles to free himself, while other Mannequins pull off his coat.

[...] Trying to get away, the Leader pulls Mannequin-Guard's hand with all his might. The hand remains in the Leader's own palm. Visibly shaken, he drops the hand, which falls to the floor with a clatter.

Mannequin-Guard bends down, picks up his hand and calmly fits it back.)

Scissors as a guillotine and a huge iron as an additional instrument of torture, the man's struggle with puppets, hands falling to the floor 'with a clatter' – is this part of a comedy, or is it not? The ominous atmosphere of the scene is darkened by the Leader's awareness that something horrible is taking place – 'visibly shaken', he is the one who least understands what is happening. What had begun for him as a jolly evening ends tragically, or at least looks like a tragedy at this point. The mannequins, initially portrayed as ludicrous in their all-too human vanity, now reveal themselves as sinister, vengeful monsters. But they are not aware of their own monstrosity, in the same way as Pierre felt no remorse for killing thousands of Parisians in *I Burn Paris*. On the contrary, Pierre believed that he had every right to do what he was doing; he felt 'like Christ'. Whatever

the ideological goals of the author may be, the fact remains that a sinister deed is being performed, a human being is being executed by puppets who have usurped the role of the oppressed fighting for their right to dance. Are we, as witnesses to this ludicrous spectacle, obliged to accept its logic? And even more importantly, does the author expect us to accept it, or is he simply 'throwing out' the problem for consideration as he did in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* and in *I Burn Paris?* Jasieński has emphatically left the judgement of his play to its readers.²⁰

It has been pointed out on several occasions that grotesque work aims to awaken our conscience: it provokes us, it poses questions and leaves us alone to find the answers. Of course, as spectators we see the spectacle as a reflection of our own reality – perhaps in a crooked mirror, perhaps through a magnifying glass – but we always decipher it as our own world. Thus, if the mannequins represent the oppressed and the Leader is the oppressor, is his death 'an historical necessity', and should it be sanctioned in the same way as we should sanction the deaths of members of the bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the October Revolution? The reader has to weigh this question carefully on his own, considering the implication of the disturbing grotesque which exposes the vulnerability of human values when they are subjected to the jargon of ideology. And this is the general philosophical point which this 'fantastic tragifarce', as Stern puts it (1969:215), in the end forcefully projects to the reader.

In common-sense understanding, the Leader has been murdered; for him comedy has turned into tragedy.²¹ But since this is a grotesque world, the laws of nature have been

²⁰ In the statement in his autobiographical sketch where he speaks about the play, he concludes: 'In my opinion, this undertaking was brought to a successful end. But let the reader be the judge of it' (1972:253).

²¹ Normally when we speak about comedy and tragedy in the context of the grotesque, we understand them as aspects of the fullness of life where both these elements are essential to human experience (see Jennings 1963:25-26; Thomson 1972:63). Such also was the understanding of Victor Hugo (see Clayborough 1965:45-49). Jasieński's play does not have this particular dimension. The comedy and the tragedy do not fuse; instead both are inhibited by the play's grotesque deformation, and rather they are farcical parodies of themselves. Parody is understood here as an 'incongruous imitation' (see Petro 1982:12) of tragedy achieved by the 'ludicrous

abolished; there is no mention or evidence of the physiological effects of beheading, such as blood or physical pain, any more than there was the case of Isolda's legs in Jasieński's earlier work. The Leader does not die after his head is chopped off; he continues to function as a living creature: he moves, he talks, and is angry. The tragedy becomes its own parody, enforcing further the grotesque nature of the events and the participating characters. The *mannequinness* of the Leader is exposed by analogy: like the puppets around him, he too can walk and scream and speak, although, like them, he does not have a head. The logic underpinning this scene is the same as the logic of Berg in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* who would not accept the decay of the Nikē of Phidias simply because she was headless (see Chapter V). But while in the case of Berg this logic was intended to illustrate the Futuristic consciousness of the protagonist, the logic applied in *The Ball of the Mannequins* aims to prove the non-human nature of the Leader – he does not die because, like the Nikē, he too is only a mannequin, a version of a statue. He is convinced that the whole event is 'a masquerade', 'a conspiracy' to compromise him politically and when '*his head rolls on the floor*' as the stage directions inform, he does not cry for his human head but for his 'ministerial head': 'My head! My ministerial head' (140).

If one seriously considers these events, the *peripeteia* is illusory. As a politician the Leader was already, metaphorically speaking, a puppet. This is deliberately emphasised by the mannequins discussing his behaviour when he comes to fit his suits. Mannequin 1 mentions the obsequious behaviour of the atelier's owner, while the employees call the Leader 'socialist-chloroformist' (136),²² clearly mocking his strategy of lulling everybody's awareness of what his political aims truly are. Cutting off his head has exposed him in the literal sense as a true puppet. The only thing that has changed is that without his head the Leader is no longer perceived by the mannequins as dangerous, for in their opinion he has lost all credibility with human beings, a credibility he had only when his 'appendage' was on his shoulders. As Male Mannequin 3 explains:

contrast' between sordid presentation and serious content (see Thomson 1972:41).

²² Neologism formed from 'chloroform' – a colourless, sweet smelling liquid used as a general anaesthetic.

Bez głowy może sobie uciekać, dokąd chce. Choćby do rana tłumaczył, co się stało, i tak mu nikt nie uwierzy. Pomyśl, że gość tak się spił, że stracił z kretesem głowę i plecie jakieś banialuki. (1966:141)

Without his head he can run wherever he wishes. Even if he keeps explaining for the whole night what has happened no one will believe him. They will think that the fellow got himself drunk to such a degree that he completely lost his head and now talks utter nonsense.

In the context of the situation which leads to the beheading of a human being, the casual literal application of a popular idiom-metaphor introduces an element of grotesque humour. Playing with the polyvalency of 'head', Jasieński does not elaborate the common allegory where head signifies reason, where the expression *Bom, голова!*, 'What a head!' means that the person's wisdom is being acknowledged, but parodies it, in a way similar to Gogol²³ where 'head' signifies insolence and arrogance. Exploring various semantic, literal and figurative meanings of the word 'head', Jasieński's adds to it the notion of 'head' being an allegorical representation of social status. According to the grotesque logic of the play the protagonist does not die but his beheading is tantamount to his social annihilation. In this way, through the grotesque, the absurd laws of the human world are convincingly exposed. Such an interpretation is confirmed by the change of name the author gives to his protagonist. Initially known only as 'Man', then as the 'Leader', now when his head is cut off, his real identity, Ribandell,²⁴ is revealed. Ironically the name does not make him human. Without his title Ribandell is nothing; in the universe of the play he only can have a meaning as Ribandell the Leader, clearly implying that, according to the logic of the play's grotesque universe, 'head' does not symbolise 'humanness' but status

²³ The head as a superfluous attribute of various functionaries is exposed in many metaphors used by Gogol. In *Майская ночь* ('May Night'), for instance, especially the chapter *Голова* ('The Head'), Gogol mocks the vanity of a careerist. Also Ermilov notes in respect of *The Nose*: 'He требовалось головы, чтобы стать статским советником' ('A head was not needed in order to become Councillor of State') (*Гений Гоголя*, Москва 1959:205).

²⁴ The name Ribandell sounds close enough to the French word *ribambelle*, used to denote a person who has many children; This meaning is illustrated in *Nouveau Petit Le Robert dictionnaire de la Langue Française* with the line from Hugo: *Fais-lui un enfant, deux enfants, trois enfants, une ribambelle d'enfants* (1995).

associated with one's social position (*чин*).²⁵ This explains why the mannequins are no longer afraid of the leader, because, as plain Ribandell, he ceases to be 'an important person'.

In this sense, the world of the mannequins is no better than that of the humans. Mannequin 50 is a prominent figure, the judges are chosen among the 'bigger sizes' reflecting the hierarchical differentiation in the bizarre community of dummies, while Male Mannequin 1 is destined to replace the Leader. The fact that there is no distinct qualitative differentiation between mannequins and humans means that human beings in general – or, using ideological jargon, both the oppressed and the oppressors – are guilty of similar follies. Thus the mannequins are exposed as being just as hypocritical as human beings. They too attach undue importance to social or political position. Being 'simple' headless mannequins they despise and mock human beings, their heads especially:

Manekin Męski 6: Tak, noszą na plecach te bezkształtne puste dynie, które nazywają głowami. Czyż to nie taki sam koszmar jak ich ubrania? Nie wiem, może są wśród nich tacy, których głowy mają jakieś szczególne przeznaczenie, ale większość tych darmozjadów używa ich tylko jako podpórek do śmiesznych, przypominających kominy kapeluszy. [...] (1966:129)

Male Mannequin 6: Yes, they carry on their shoulders these shapeless empty pumpkins which they call heads. Isn't it the same horror as their clothes? Well, I don't know, maybe some of them have a special designation for their heads, but most of these spongers use them only as a support for these ridiculous hats resembling chimneys. [...]

²⁵ In this sense the Gogolian character of the play is almost self-explanatory, for the themes of *преклонение перед чином* ('worship of position') one occupies in the administrative or political hierarchy as well as *честолюбие* ('ambition') were among the favourite targets of Gogol's satires, conspicuously evident in his comedy *The Government Inspector*, but also in his unfinished play *Владимир 3-й степени* 'The Order of St Vladimir' and in the short story *Hoc* 'The Nose'. In the Soviet Union this tendency thrived, and this is the theme of Mayakovsky's vitriolic satires *Баня* ('The Bathhouse') and *Kron* ('The Bed Bug'). One may quote just one brilliantly ludicrous pronouncement by Optimistenko, a character from *The Bathhouse*: *Нам все равно, какое лицо стоит во главе учреждения, потому, что мы уважаем только то лицо, которое поставлено и стоит.* ('It is all the same for us what person is at the head of the institution, because we respect only that person that is put there and stays') meaning that the respect is derived not from the qualities of a person, but from the position which that person occupies. (*Пьесы, Москва. 1976:235*).

Their hypocrisy is revealed however, when there is one head available and all want it. Realising that its possession would be advantageous, the mannequins argue among themselves about who will wear the Leader's head. Signifying power and political career, the head thus becomes an object of a struggle which resembles 'the devilish dance for chairs', to which Jasieński's alluded in his 1932 letter to MORP (see Chapter III, footnote 38):

Manekin Męski 2 (*podnosi głowę Leadera i przypatrując się obraca ją w rękach*): *A co zrobimy z głową?*

Manekiny: *Stuśnij! Głowa! Co zrobimy z głową?*

Manekin Męski 1: *Dajcie ją mnie.*

Manekin-Sędzia: *Dlaczego tobie? Mnie! Ja mu ją odciąłem, więc do mnie powinna należeć!*

Manekin Męski 3: *Czym ją odciąłeś? Żelazkiem?... Przecież odciędziemy ją nożycami. A kto trzymał nożyce? Ja! Głowa należy do mnie.*

Manekin Męski 6: *Wielka mi rzecz: trzymał nożyce! Każdy mógł je trzymać. Ale ja je znalazłem pod stołem w pracowni. Bez nożyce w ogóle nie odcieliłybyśmy mu głowy. Więc do kogo powinna należeć? Rzecz jasna, że do mnie.*

Manekin Męski 4: *Nieprawda! Do mnie! Ja ją wsunąłem pomiędzy nożyce.* (1966:141)

Male Mannequin 2 (*lifting up the Leader's head, looking at it and turning it in his hands*): *What shall we do with it?*

Mannequins: *Yes! The head! What shall we do with the head!*

Male Mannequin 1: *Give it to me.*

Mannequin-Judge: *Why you? Give it to me! I cut off his head, it should belong to me!*

Male Mannequin 3: *With what did you cut it? With the iron?... We cut it with the scissors. And who held the scissors? Me! The head is mine!*

Male Mannequin 6: *Big deal: he held the scissors! Anyone could have held it. But I found the scissors under the table in the workshop. Without them we wouldn't have cut off his head at all. So, who should have it? It's obvious – I!*

Male Mannequin 4: *It is not true! It is mine! I put the head between the blades.*

To conclude their argument the mannequins draw lots, but before the draw takes place, the male mannequins decide that the female mannequins cannot participate in the draw. The selective grotesque logic of the play chooses to enforce at this moment our own logic that a male head must sit on a male body. Again a brilliant satiric point is made – again universal – that logic can be manipulated and arbitrarily imposed, while the only rule that is obeyed is that of expediency. The satiric overtones in this scene are enhanced by its conspicuously grotesque nature. We see dummies playing with a human head, fighting for

it and bragging brazenly about their 'contribution' to the gruesome act. The horror and laughter, the possible and the impossible, the human head and the object of some ludicrous struggle – all this is fused in this scene conceived by the author's gallows humour. The effect of this scene with the human head being tossed around by the headless dummies is a grotesque concoction of horror and laughter. As if this metaphoric and literal play with a human head were not enough to satisfy the author's determination to amuse and shock the audience, he maintains the tone in which the mannequins draw lots by 'breaking the head of a matchstick' and whoever draws the 'headless matchstick wins'. In this commotion, Male Mannequin 1 exclaims: 'I've got it! I've got it! Without a head!' (142). The irony is that a matchstick 'without a head' gives him the right to the Leader's head. The head – or the position, depending which interpretation we wish to choose – stays the same, but the puppets are changing.

The winner immediately realises the potential this new acquisition holds for him. He is no longer satisfied with being 'a perfect-body dummy on a stick', and triumphantly exclaims:

Manekin Męski 1: A co wyście myśleli? Że po to wygrałem głowę, żeby pozostać tu z wami, a z pierwszym promieniem świtu przekradać się z powrotem do pracowni? Drżeć, czy właściciel i pracownicy nie zauważą czegoś? Znowu przekształcić się w kukłę na kiju? Przymierzać ciągle całymi dniami garnitury, które szyją nie dla mnie? I wyczekiwąć, ażby kiedyś – może za rok-dwa, a może za dziesięć lat – znów nadarzyła się okazja, która mi pozwoli zebrać do kupy wszystkie brakujące członki i wymknąć się na kilka godzin do miasta? Nie! Nie ma głupich! Dość mam tego! Duszę się tutaj! Wygrałem głowę! Rozumiecie? Ludzką głowę! Paszport, z którym mogę teraz spacerować po całym świecie. Chodzić, dokąd zechcę i kiedy zechcę! Klucz, który otworzy przede mną wszystkie drzwi. Idę! Pędzę! Palto! Rękawiczki! Cylinder! (1966:144)

Male Mannequin 1: And what did you think? That I won the head to stay here with you, and with the first rays of the sun to sneak back to the atelier? To tremble in case the owner or his employees noticed something suspicious? To become a dummy on a stick again? To fit suits for them which are made not for me? And wait until some time – maybe in a year or two, or maybe in ten years – the opportunity will arise that I can put together all my limbs and sneak out to town for a few hours? No! No, I am not a fool! I have had enough of it! I am suffocating! I won the head! Do you understand? The human head! A passport which allows me to walk all over the world. Walk wherever and whenever I please! A key which will open all doors for me. I am off! I am out of here! The coat! The gloves! The silk-hat!

The immediate point is made that the moment you climb up the social ladder you despise those at the bottom. This arrogance and forgetfulness, typical of social climbers, is evident in the rhetoric and tone of the puppet's speech. His perspective conspicuously changes: what was previously subjected to ridicule ('hats resembling chimneys') now becomes an indispensable accessory of status. The conspicuous visual grotesque of Act I, strongly supported with an irony that exposes the intrinsic emptiness and hypocrisy of the universe of the mannequins, nevertheless ends on a high note. The puppet with a human head goes into the human world with hope and optimism, with a firm belief that he has found true freedom. No one will now tell him what he must do; he has the passport to a better life. But we, as the audience, do not share his hopes and joy. Seeing his arrogant boastfulness we watch the scene with scepticism. The mannequin's view of the human world is superficial, his hopes are therefore ludicrous and vain.

In Act II we move to the residence of the industrialist Arnoux who holds an annual ball for Parisian high society, and where Ribandell is anxiously awaited. The real reason for this gathering is not to dance but to sort out business-related issues. In short, Arnoux has won a tender for the commercially important manufacture of cars. He has won it because he has estimated his costs by employing a cheaper work force, cutting down his workers' wages by five francs a day. In response to this, the Communists call a strike in his factory. Levasin, Arnoux's main competitor who has lost the tender, supports the idea of a strike, hoping that it will ruin his competitor. The Leader of the Socialist Democrats holds the key to success for one or the other of these commercial adversaries. His party's support of the Communists, or lack of support, will predetermine the victory or failure of the strike. Both industrialists resort to tricks. Arnoux instructs his daughter, Angelica, to seduce the Leader, and to convince him to withhold the participation of Socialist Democrats in the strike. Levasin instructs his wife, Solange, to charm the Leader and convince him that the Socialist Democrats should participate in the strike and destroy Arnoux. Both names, Angelica and Solange, are derived from the French word *ange*, meaning 'angel'. Jasieński's heroines caricature the notion of 'angelic' attributes in females. The two 'ladies' traffic with their bodies as commodities and the only love they know is love of money and of their own egos. Both are experienced coquettes and they

eagerly agree to the intrigue, but only for the sake of their own vanity, having little concern for the financial success of either Arnoux or Levasin. Angelica is Levasin's mistress while Solange is the mistress of Arnoux, facts known to all the parties involved. The defeat or victory of either man changes nothing for them, because if not the father – or the husband, in case of Solange – then the lover wins.

Nevertheless, the primary intention of the play is not to moralise – at least this is what the author wants us to believe if we recall his words quoted earlier – but to present a critical image of a social class that has outlived itself.²⁶ Thus the 'comedy' continues when the creature called by the author 'Mannequin-Leader' arrives at Arnoux's ball, but whom everyone present at the party takes for an influential politician who holds the key to success, the Leader of Socialist Democrats himself.²⁷

Ironically, the structural shift of realms from the fantastic universe of mannequins to the real world of human beings is deployed not to contrast these worlds – good mannequins versus bad human beings – but to mirror them as images of the same moral and spiritual emptiness. That mannequins resemble the shape of human body is normal – it is our logic – but that human beings resemble mannequins is the 'mannequins' logic' of the play which is meant to expose the hollowness of the human bodily shell, the lack of higher qualities which really distinguishes humankind from puppets and look-alike automata. As the action develops, we begin to understand the significance of the title of the play – *The Ball of the Mannequins* – as applying both to the mannequins and to the humans. In the play's

²⁶ Jasieński expressed his antagonistic attitude to the bourgeoisie in the Futuristic collection *Earth to the Left: Nienawidzimy burżuja nie tylko tego, który zasłania nam dzisiaj świat wytartym banknotem swojej gęby – lecz burżuja jako abstarkcje, jego widzenie świata i każdą rzecz, która jego jest.* ('We hate a bourgeois, not only him who conceals from us the true face of the world with a shabby banknote of his mug, but also a bourgeois as an abstract, his view of the world and everything else he has') (1972:240).

²⁷ The similarity of Jasieński's Act II with Gogol's *Pełniżop* ('The Government Inspector') is striking, not only because of the motif of mistaken identity but also because of the issue of bribery, and flirting with two women. One difference is important though: while Khlestakov participates consciously and willingly in the deceit, Mannequin-Leader does not understand the machinations of the human world.

universe, the fantastic world of mannequins and the 'real' world of human beings are not antonyms but synonyms, for mannequins behave like human beings and human beings behave in a way similar to mannequins, as we saw in Act I.

As with all good theatre, the visual effect of the play is as important as its text with all its stage directions. The conspicuous ambiguity of the human body and its appearance, the confusion of identities, the substitution of *what it is* with *what we see* can fully be conveyed only on the stage. Thus Act I relies on the bold visual grotesque that depends, as noted earlier, on the ambivalence generated by the image of a human body.²⁸ The immediate visual association between a puppet and a human being is achieved with much greater effect than would be possible in fiction. The stage production enhances the deliberately grotesque ambiguity, evidently intended by the author who designed a play in which human beings (actors) play puppets (mannequins) who imitate *human beings*.

In Act II the situation changes, the action moves to the human world, and the real human beings (other actors) behave like puppets and take a puppet, Mannequin-Leader, for a real human being. The world thus created is not aware of its own grotesqueness, of the ludicrous nature of its own actions and appearance. That is why the human beings at the Arnoux ball do not notice any difference when a mannequin appears instead of the real Leader. Being a politician, that is a metaphorical puppet, the real Leader would behave in exactly the same way as Mannequin-Leader behaves, a real puppet with a human head. The industrialists are aware of the puppet-like qualities of politicians, which is why they intend to bribe him, so he will 'dance to their music'. What seems to be an hilarious comedy of circumstances is actually a vitriolic satire brought about by the substitution of the Leader with the mannequin. All these shrewd men who really know how to look after their own interests are in the end 'taken for a ride' by a dummy. They do not anticipate that their approach might be enacted literally, thus they bribe a mannequin who cares little for their prosperity. The Mannequin-Leader unwittingly complies with their requests even

²⁸ See Jennings: 'The grotesque object is a figure imagined in terms of human form but devoid of real humanity'. The function of such image is 'to screen from view [...] higher attributes of human personality' (1963:9) while its purpose is to evoke both amusement and fear (*ibid.*:12).

though they are contradictory, for he neither sees nor cares for any difference. The real reason for his decision is that he wants to dance – that is the *only* reason he came to Arnoux's ball – but human beings keep pestering him, so in response to whatever they tell him, he answers 'yes'. The analogy with Gogol's Khlestakov is telling for it emphasises the difference in Jasieński's approach. Khlestakov is not a big-time swindler, his actions are not premeditated, he simply uses the circumstances offered and cooperates with true swindlers, because eventually he realises that it is advantageous to him.²⁹ The Mannequin-Leader understands none of the benefits of his new position, for he has no understanding of human politics.

Allowing an actual puppet to make fools of real humans indicates that Jasieński derided the Arnouxs, Levasins and Ribandells of this world as much as he derided humans in general and their inability or unwillingness to look behind the façade, the 'aura' of greatness, to see what it hides. Jasieński's vitriolic ridicule of human vanity and worship of status makes *The Ball of the Mannequins* an exposition of his essential misanthropy, seen also in his earlier works, most notably in *I Burn Paris*. There are no positive characters in Jasieński's works, and *The Ball of the Mannequins* is no exception. Jasieński's characters frequently embody human obsessions and follies: Berg was driven by hatred and fear of machines, Pierre was driven by hatred of all people, the personages of *The Ball of the Mannequins* represent greediness, vanity, careerism. Strictly speaking, the mannequins are afforded more positive portrayal than humans, at least as seen in the scene in which a mannequin drags his limbless companion to a ball. This compassion is completely absent from the human world. Significantly enough, representatives of the working class, the two members of the Socialist Party, Delegate 1 and Delegate 2, are equally loathsome in their servile preoccupation with material possessions and external lustre, parallelling the mannequins' preoccupation with figure and perfectly fitting clothes.

²⁹ See Erlich's comment on Khlestakov as an 'epitome of vacuity [...], someone who does not choose the role of mountebank, but drifts into it. [...] Khlestakov does not manipulate events, but is manipulated, in a sense created, by them. He is not smart enough to be a schemer: it takes him nearly two acts to understand the situation in which he finds himself' (1969:104).

When the delegates come to Arnoux's mansion, they are less concerned with the outcome of their mission than overwhelmed by the luxury of the mansion:

Delegat 2 (do Pierwszego z zachwytem): Jaki parkiet! Co? Nogi same się ślizgają. Z nieprzyzwyczajenia można sobie łeb rozbić.

Delegat 1: To jeszcze kinderspil! żebyś zobaczył parkiet w sali balowej! Pedały same tańczą bracie! Nie trzeba lustra – możesz przejrzeć się w podłodze od stóp do głów.

Delegat 2: Nie!... A wy towarzyszu, byliście już kiedyś w sali balowej u kapitalistów?

Delegat 1: Wiadomo Nie tu, nie u Arnoux, u innych. Faktycznie w sprawach partyjnych, (rozgląda się, zauważa fotele. Do towarzysza) siadaj!

Delegat 2 (dotyka ręka fotela, potem siada. Z podziwem): Fajno sobie żyją potentaci kapitału! Co? Jeden taki fotel ile wart?

Delegat 1: Za socjalizmu każdy partyjny faktycznie będzie miał taki fotel. Już teraz niektórzy mają. Najlepszy dowód, że do socjalizmu już niedaleko. [...] (1966:167)

Delegate 2 (to Number One, amazed): What a parquet! See? Feet slip on it by themselves. One is not used to such things; one can break one's head, that's for sure.

Delegate 1: That's still *kinderspiel*³⁰! If you only saw parquet in the ballroom! Pedals³¹ dance by themselves, oh brother! You don't need a mirror – you can see yourself from head to toe in the very floor.

Delegate 2: Really!... And you, Comrade, have you ever been inside a capitalist ballroom?

Delegate 1: Sure! Not here, not in Arnoux's house, but somewhere else. Party matters, you know. (*he looks around and notices armchairs. To his comrade*) Let's sit!

Delegate 2 (touches the armchair, then sits on it. Amazed): First-class. These capitalist tycoons know the good life! What do you think, how much must such an armchair cost?

Delegate 1: In socialism every party member will actually have such an armchair. Some already have it which proves that socialism is just around the corner.

The prototypes for this particular scene might have originated in the pages of proletarian literature to which Jasieński was exposed soon after his arrival to the Soviet Union. He noticed the intrinsic contradiction in the struggle against capitalism and the desire for its luxurious lifestyle, as he saw it in the texts he had to review for *Kultura Mas*. According to Dziarnowska, in one such text by an unseasoned proletarian writer, Jasieński read: 'Perhaps it is even pleasant to drive in automobiles with women in silks, showing their

³⁰ Jasieński uses German *kinderspiel* meaning 'children's game', 'a trifle', possibly to mock the pretentious use of a foreign word by the otherwise uneducated delegate. See also the next footnote.

³¹ Instead of the word 'legs', the author uses 'pedals' – kind of street argot which forms grotesquely ludicrous combination with German *kinderspiel*. Apart from that, 'pedals' are part of a bicycle not of a human body. The speech betrays the delegate as yet another automaton.

boobs, with stupid painted faces, to drink champagne with them, to tuck in to delicacies and to dance, dance, dance... But this is not for us.' Jasieński commented: 'Reading such sentences [...] one is under the strong impression that the author's mouth watered while he was writing these words. This "But it is not for us!" betrays him completely' (in Dziarnowska 1982:293-294). Ridiculing the hapless writer of this passage, Jasieński mercilessly exposes the true feelings of the proletarian writer, his lack of the idealism expected of a true Communist, and his obvious love for the extravagant comforts of life which he pretends to despise.

The luxury of the Arnoux mansion makes a similar impression on the delegates, in whose view the advancement of socialism is measured by the number of possessions one is able to amass. The delegates openly display mannequin-like traits: they talk about dancing, they want to look at and admire themselves. There is even a possibility that they might be physically composed of parts that are not parts of a living human body – they have 'pedals' rather than legs. Slang, like metaphor, may also be affected by grotesque ambivalence and 'pedals', like any other word, may be taken either literally or metaphorically. The most biting satiric point is made through the infatuation of the delegates with sham brilliance and luxury: sham because it is superficial; there is no uplifting – moral or spiritual – substance in it. But even here there is uncertainty as to what or who the unequivocal satiric target might be, for the delegates are criticised for their shallowness both as human beings and as 'delegates'. The analogy with the mannequins is telling. Despising humans, the puppets nevertheless wanted their heads. The delegates despise capitalists but nevertheless want to sit in their armchairs and have access to their ballrooms. The party membership card makes this access possible, as Delegate 1 admits. To the possible list of satiric targets in the play we may thus add careerism, the preoccupation with personal gain and the greed of party members, while there is no reason whatever given in the play why these preoccupations should be limited only to capitalist countries, rather than to the human population as a whole, including Soviet society. This grotesque indeterminacy enhances the intensity of the ridicule and amplifies the range of Jasieński's criticism.

Having no ideological commitment, political integrity or understanding of human machinations, Mannequin-Leader agrees with everyone, instructing Delegate 1 and Delegate 2, who appear to hear the decision from their Leader, not only to demand the reinstatement of the five francs deducted from their salary by Arnoux, but, seeing earlier that the industrialists 'throw money left right and centre' (170), he instructs the delegates to demand an increase of a further five francs. At this point, Mannequin-Leader reads aloud one of the proclamations prepared by the delegates, which happens to be the Communist proclamation of the strike.

Manekin-Leader: [...] Robotnicy! bez względu na swoje przekonania polityczne – zjednoczcie się w celu wspólnego wystąpienia w obronie swoich elementarnych praw. Stwórzmy wspólny front, który zmusi do kapitulacji krwiożercze rekiny kapitału! Precz z kapitalistycznym wyzyskiem! Zwróćcie nasze pięć franków. Niech żyje wspólny front robotniczy! Precz z dyktaturą burżuazji! Niech żyje dyktatura proletariatu! (skończył czytać, złożył z powrotem kartkę. Do Delegatów) Słusznie! Zaraz podpiszę!

Delegat 1: Znaczy... towarzysz poseł podpisze nasze wezwanie? Bo to jest apel komunistów. Nasz to ten drugi, ten który towarzysz poseł trzyma w ręku – przeciwko strajkowi.

Manekin-Leader: A po co właściwie drugi, jeśli ten jest dobry? [...] (1966:170)

Mannequin-Leader: Workers! Regardless of your political convictions – unite in order to defend your basic rights. Let's create a common front, which will force the bloodthirsty capitalist sharks to capitulate! Down with capitalist exploitation! Give us back our five francs! Long live our united proletarian front! Down with the bourgeois dictatorship! Long live the dictatorship of the proletariat! (*he finishes reading, folds the proclamation. To Delegates*) Quite so! I'll sign it right away!

Delegate 1: Does this mean... Comrade Deputy will sign whose proclamation? This was the appeal of the Communists. Ours is the other one, the one that Comrade Deputy still holds in his hand – the one against the strike.

Mannequin-Leader: Why? This one is quite all right. [...]

The language of the proclamation is as simplistic as that of the workers' speeches in the utopian world of *I Burn Paris* and as the speech of the delegate who addresses the Leader in the third person, exposing both his simple-mindedness and bootlicking attitude. The aggressive tone of the proclamation is ludicrous, not only because the demand for 'five francs' is offset with 'bloodthirsty sharks', but also because of the close juxtaposition of slogans which emphasise the power struggle more than they emphasise the call for social

justice. Simultaneously, the tone is ominous because, firstly we have seen what the mannequins – that is ‘the oppressed’ – had done to a human being – the oppressor – and secondly, because we recognise in this proclamation expressions directly borrowed from Soviet propaganda. Although the satiric targets in the play constantly alternate between criticism of human folly in general and narrower criticism of its specific manifestations in the society in which Jasieński lives, the ideological significance of the play as merely an anti-capitalist farce is feeble. The ideological classification of the Leader as a phenomenon exclusive to Social Democrats is purely a matter of emphasis which Jasieński deliberately and consistently avoids to provide. Corrupt careerists are everywhere, ideology or political affiliation makes no difference to them. The fact that the resolution of the conflict in the play is ‘politically correct’ from the Communist point of view does not result from a farsighted political vision, but is a matter of chance and is attributed to a puppet. Mannequin-Leader signs all the necessary documents in support of the strike not only in Arnoux’s factory but also in Levasin’s, not because he is convinced that this is the only right thing to do, but because this was the first resolution of the two he was given to read (170). His action is thus wholly arbitrary and not governed by any principles whatever. Finally, he hands over to the delegates the money which he received as bribes disguised as donations ‘for the skilfully prepared strike [but] at some more opportune moment’ (152, 159). He orders that the money be distributed among the striking workers. While the delegates accept Mannequin-Leader’s decision as an ingenious tactic, Arnoux and Levasin see in it the most devious design, with well-considered personal gain for the Leader himself. These human beings, like the mannequins, judge others solely by their own experience: if I am a scoundrel and a cheat so must everyone else be. But in the grotesque universe there can never be a situation in which ‘all’s well that ends well’. Here too, the ‘politically correct’ outcome – the workers are rewarded while the capitalist villains are penalised – is undermined by the fact that the determining role is entrusted to a mannequin. The saviour of the workers is not an ingenious politician but a dummy, interested only in dancing. His ‘wise’ decisions are taken in haste, to get rid of the delegates: ‘Well, goodbye. I am expected. I have to dance.’ (172) Human beings and their problems bore him, while their behaviour and reasoning elude his comprehension. The simple device of putting a puppet in the place of a political leader and making him arrive at a correct

decision has undeniable satirical impact, but the satire is directed at all sorts of politicians whose success is the result of mimicry, ignorance, good luck and skilful manoeuvring rather than sincere devotion to the cause.

This point is very clearly reiterated later by the Party Delegates who come to receive orders about the strike from the Leader of the Party. Talking about the Party, Delegate 1 – ‘1’ meaning also the one more senior – explains to Delegate 2 that the party is like a staircase, and all cannot get to the top at the same time; only those who have the ‘knack for it’ can do so:

Delegat 1: Każdy, kto ma łeb na karku, trafi [na góre]. Młodziak jeszcze jestesi w partii niedawno – musisz patrzeć na starszych i uczyć się rozumu. Polityka dla początkującego to, żebyświedział, to samo co pływanie łódką. Siądziesz pierwszy raz – i w głowie ci się kręci. Kierujesz na prawo – jedziesz na lewo, kierujesz na lewo – jedziesz na prawo. Wszystko ci wychodzi na wybrót. Dopiero potem, kiedy już trochę doszlusujesz, zaczynasz rozumieć: żeby jechać w tym kierunku, o który ci chodzi, trzeba wiosłować w kierunku odwrotnym. Z początku, dopóki nie chwyciłeś tego sekretu, wszystko cię dziwi, bracie. A jak tylko zaczniesz się mądrzyć, wszystko przepadło, pójdziesz na dno. Bo pierwsza rzecz w karierze politycznej – niczemu się nie dziwić, patrzeć, co robią starsi. Choćby ci się miało sto razy wydawać, że trzeba robić inaczej – nie gadaj nic i rób, jak ci każą. Zrozumieć zawsze jeszcze będziesz miał czas. Tak, bracie, polityka to nieprosta rzecz.

Delegat 2: Ale przecie niekiedy bywa, że nawet najwyższe asy partyjne pokpią coś i łamią sobie kark. Jak wtedy zrozumieć, czy to błąd, czy polityka?

Delegat 1: Zanim twój leader złamie sobie kark, ciebie już dawno zjedzą robaki na obiad. Żebyświedział, że jeśli już taki leader złamie sobie kark, to i wtedy ma jakąś swoją specjalną polityczną kalkulację. Jak pobędziesz dłużej w partii – sam to zrozumiesz. (1966:168-169)

Delegate 1: Everyone who has a head on his shoulders will get there [to the top]. You are still young and new in the Party – you have to look at your elders and learn to understand. To a novice politics is, you must understand, similar to rowing a boat. You sit there for the first time and your head spins. You turn right – you go to the left; you turn left – you go to the right. Everything is upside down. Only later, when you are more informed, do you begin to understand that if you want to go in one direction you must paddle in the opposite direction. At the beginning, when you don't know this secret, you are constantly surprised, and if you try to be clever, you go right to the very bottom. Because the first thing you must know about a political career is not to wonder at anything but to look what older [comrades] are doing. Even if a hundred times you think that it must be done differently, say nothing, and do what you are told. You will have time to understand it later. Yes, brother, politics is not an easy thing.

Delegate 2: But sometimes it happens that even the biggest Party aces make a mistake and break their necks. How do you know then whether it's politics or a mistake?

Delegate 1: Before your leader breaks his neck, the worms will first eat you for dinner.

You must know that if such a leader breaks a neck, then even in this he must have a political calculation. When you have been in the Party long enough, you will see how it works.

The seemingly simplistic logic of this conversation is a scathing critique of dishonesty and opportunism; it reveals the whole 'know-how' of survival under the changing demands of ideology. Its relevance to Jasieński's own position after his arrival in the Soviet Union is striking. One senses that Jasieński reproduces here the conversations he, as a novice, must have held with his older Communist friends, like Dąbal for instance, who from the beginning of Jasieński's stay in the Soviet Union was Jasieński's 'number one' ideological mentor.³² From the moment Jasieński arrived in the Soviet Union he was surrounded by intrigues and struggles for power disguised behind 'well-dressed' ideological slogans. In his pronouncements on art and literature Jasieński emphatically criticised the simple-mindedness, opportunism and hypocrisy of some writers and critics. Thus the significance of the mannequin with a human head speaking on behalf of the oppressed is devastatingly ironic. The satiric impact of the Communist proclamation of the strike being read to guests gathered at Arnoux's house by the grotesque figure of a puppet is brilliantly double-edged. It explicitly allows the Communist cause to be outlined to capitalists through a mannequin dummy who has no idea what 'it' is doing, suggesting another explicit perspective, namely that Communist declarations may be pronounced by a human dummy who recites them without any understanding of the meaning of the words he utters.

Inter alia, the function of the grotesque in the play is to expose the deceptive nature of appearance. An essential part of this deception is played by language. The ability to utter words, as noted in respect of Act I, is not exclusive to humans. While the mannequins' language – that is, what they are saying – is not crucial to the grotesque, the very fact that

³² Recalling these days later in his letters to various party officials before and after his arrest, Jasieński spoke with anger of 'self-appointed nannies'. He writes directly that 'Dąbal played the role of my older and more experienced comrade, the always helpful staunch Communist' (in Jaworski 1995:158, 165 respectively).

they as dummies can speak, is crucial. The opposite applies to the language of humans. That human beings speak is normal, but *how* they use this 'gift' is important for the grotesque.³³ Assuming that Jasieński's intention was to expose the moral and spiritual hollowness of the bourgeoisie, we should consider the significant function of language in the play. The very fact that mannequins can speak 'degrades' the language of humans. The puppets have misappropriated the language of social struggle and of legitimate human suffering. This misappropriation incited them to rebel against a human being whom they decapitated. On the other hand, lacking as they do any individualisation, their use of the language of human beings is intended to convey their marionette-like essence. Jasieński's use of language in this play, criticised for its inferior quality, by Stern among others, may in this light be regarded as an intentional artistic device to further the sweeping satiric purpose of this play.

Jasieński knew Russian long before he came to the Soviet Union. He considered himself as having a gift for languages (in Jaworski 1995:171). It is known that he translated Krylov's epigrams for a school magazine when he was in his early teens (Dziarnowska 1982:11), while later he translated Mayakovsky, Esenin and Lenin. Although the occasional rigidity of language in *The Ball of the Mannequins* may be attributed either to a poor translation from Polish or more likely to the haste with which the play was prepared for publication, it is unlikely that Jasieński, frequently praised for his exceptional feeling for language, would allow phraseological clumsiness and syntactic repetitions to the extent they appear in the play without having explicit reasons for doing so. It has to be accepted that Jasieński deliberately makes the speech of humans sound like the speech of puppets. The automatic repetition of phrases implies that the speakers do not comprehend the true meaning of the words they pronounce, and also indicates that they misappropriate language as a means of meaningful communication. Thus all the 'human' characters who

³³ The use of language for satirical purposes may be illustrated by Ehrenburg's *Бурная жизнь Лазика Ройтшванета* ('The Stormy Life of Lazik Roytshvanets' 1928), a novel about the turbulent life of an uninitiated Communist who pretends to be a simpleton in order to tell the truth with impunity. The eponymous dimwitted hero continually challenges the language of set and figurative expressions, interpreting them literally, a habit that consistently lands him in trouble.

subsequently appear in Act II – Arnoux, Angelica, Levasin, Solange, and the Mannequin-Leader – speak in a similar way, occasionally repeating identical phrases. One may compare scenes with Arnoux (152) and Levasin (160) when the Mannequin-Leader hesitantly – not because he finds it inappropriate but because he does not understand this gesture – accepts the bribe:

Levasin: Żadnych 'ale', drogi panie... Żadnych 'ale'. Sądzę, że mam chyba prawo, jako obywatel tego kraju troszczyć się o jego racjonalny rozwój i przyczynić się, chociażby w skromnej mierze, do uleżenia warunków pracy ludzi, którzy poświęcają dobru społecznemu cały swój czas i wszystkie swoje siły. Doprawdy nie mówmy o tym więcej! (1966:160)

Levasin: No ‘buts’, my dear friend! No ‘buts’! I am sure that as a citizen of this country I have a right to be concerned with its rational development and to contribute, even in this modest way, to bettering the condition of the working class that devotes all its time and its strength to the common cause. Let’s leave it at that.

Grandiloquent words like ‘citizen’, ‘right’ ‘common cause’ are used, but they mean nothing because in the human world communication takes place not on the purely semantic level, and words do not mean what they are supposed to mean. Thus ‘citizen’ means ‘I’, ‘right’ means ‘do me a favour’, and ‘modest contribution’ means ‘here is some money to keep you happy’. Communication is replaced by word-play. This is why human beings speak using repetitions, clichés, empty declarations and euphemisms. Arnoux talks of a ‘rational strike’ (152) and believes that ‘duty comes first, and only later is there time for amusement’ (151) meaning by ‘rational strike’ – ‘when it suits me’, by ‘duty’ – his private business, disguised as the ‘well-understood interest of workers’ (151). Levasin talks about the ‘fixed policy’ of the Socialist Democrats represented by Mannequin-Leader (160) and sums up their conversation as ‘an interesting debate about the current economic situation’ (162). So many ideologically charged words – and so little meaning in them.

The abuse of language is exposed because the Mannequin-Leader is a true dummy, unable to comprehend the double meaning of language, he is unable ‘to read between the lines’. He does not grasp the complexity of language usage in human society. Without hesitation he promises both Arnoux and Levasin to comply with their contradictory requests,

understanding none of the double significance of their speech and its implications. Human beings, on the other hand, accustomed to reading 'between the lines' misinterpret the straightforward words of Mannequin-Leader. This is well illustrated by the scene in which Angelica and later Solange try to seduce the mannequin. Because the mannequin treats human beings as puppets – he is not able to comprehend the difference – and the women treat the mannequin as a real person – they see only his head, that is, his status – the conversation leads to formidable comical misunderstandings of which only the audience, as outsiders to this world, are aware. Mannequin-Leader evaluates human beings in the only way he knows, by size and figure. Angelica and Madame Levasin laughably take this as proof that the Leader is the true connoisseur when it comes to women:

Manekin-Leader: Hm... Jest stosunkowo zgrabna, ale jak na czterdziesty numer trochę za płaska w biodrach.

Angelica: Jak pan szczegółowo analizuje kobiety! Obnaża je pan wprost wzrokiem. Jeśli jednak chodzi o nią, to się pan myli. Ma zbyt krótkie nogi. W sukni tego nie widać, gdyż robi sobie dość wysoko talię. Ale jeśli zobaczy ją pan rozebraną, a nie wątpię, że stanie się to w najbliższym czasie, to sam się pan przekona... W dodatku ta kobieta nie zajmuje się żadnym sportem, prócz miłości. A to nie wpływa bynajmniej na dobrą budowę (1966:175)

Mannequin-Leader: Well... she has a rather good figure, but for a size forty, her hips are a bit too flat.

Angelica: What a profound analysis of women! You simply undress them with your eyes. But in her case, you are mistaken. Her legs are too short. You can't see it when she is dressed, because her dresses all have a higher waist. But if you see her without her clothes – and I don't doubt you will in the nearest future – then you'll see for yourself... After all, this woman does not play any sport, apart from love. But this does not improve her figure – on the contrary.

When Angelica asks what the Leader thinks of her, the mannequin's judgement relates exclusively to her figure:

Angelica: Ale nie wypowiedział pan ostatecznie swego zdania... Jakie braki zauważyl pan u mnie?

Manekin-Leader (przyglądając się jej badawczo): Nie ma pani prawie zupełnie biustu. Dlatego też suknie na pani nie leżą zbyt dobrze.

Angelica (urażona): Co-o-o? No wie pan, to już bezczelność! (zrzaca porywczo ramiączka z ramienia i obnaża piersi, odwrócona tyłem do widowni) No? Czy śmie pan nadal obstawać przy swoim zdaniu?

Manekin-Leader (*bardzo spokojnie obrzuca ją spojrzeniem znałczy, po czym prawą ręką odwraca ją z lekka, dotykając palcami łopatek*): *Łopatki nieco wystają...* (1966:176)

Angelica: But you didn't say what you think of me... What are my defects?

Mannequin-Leader (*scrutinising her*): You have almost no breasts. That is why dresses don't always look well on you.

Angelica (*sulking*): Wha-a-at? How dare you! (*she pulls the straps down and bares her breasts, with her back turned towards spectators*) Well? Do you still think that my breasts are too small?

Mannequin-Leader (*looks at her indifferently like an expert, then he turns her slightly holding her shoulder*): Your shoulder blades are protruding slightly...

At this point the guests enter the room and see Angelica undressed. Angelica insists that her father announces her engagement to the Leader. The mannequin is not disturbed by this sudden turn of events, apart from worrying that the excited woman may break his finger, that is, damage his body (177). The similar encounter between Mannequin-Leader and Solange ends in the mannequin measuring the length of the semi-naked Solange's legs. When this time guests enter and see Madame Levasin undressed, they decide that the honour of both women has been tarnished and to defend it they arrange a duel. The Mannequin-Leader's *wooden* indifference³⁴ to their amorous advances is interpreted by both women as provocation on his part, as a proof of his finesse in lovemaking, and as a consequence of his highly analytical intellect, in the same way as his dealings with the Delegates were mistaken for the working of a shrewd political mind. In the eyes of this gathering, Mannequin-Leader has everything he needs to be an astounding social success.

The unmasking of language, and with it the unmasking of the true nature of the play's human world, continues. The need to arrange the duel is understood by human beings as the need to obey the custom to defend the honour of the ladies. The jargon of negotiations

³⁴ The intertextual correspondence with Gogol's *The Inspector General* is evident. Khlestakov also flirts with the mother and the daughter, having no real desire to seduce either of them, and in both cases the guests catch him *in flagrante*. Jasiński obviously wants the reader to decode his scene to see that while Khlestakov's compulsive courtship of the mother and the daughter is motivated by his need to make a conquest (see Karlinsky 1976:165), the mannequin has no understanding whatsoever of what such a conquest means. He is literally a wooden doll, thus his wooden indifference is literal, not metaphoric. The women's dancing around the wooden dummy evokes even more derisive laughter than was the case in Gogol's play.

regarding the duel – ‘two shots, two holes in the air and a problem is resolved’ (189) – lays bare the hypocrisy of the society portrayed in the play. Earlier the two women were shown as harlots who, believing that the dummy is the Leader, threw themselves at the mannequin. Now it appears that they have ‘honour’, and this ‘honour’ has to remain unsullied. The duel – the mannequin learns – is the only way to ensure it. The situation becomes even more absurd when Arnoux and Levasin learn that the strike ordered by Mannequin-Leader has affected both their factories. They feel betrayed and the duel comes close to becoming an execution. Mannequin-Leader is worried that he might be shot in his wooden body so that the bespoke suit belonging to a customer, which he is wearing, might be damaged. Thus he pleads with the human beings to shoot him in the head – he already knows that it is useless. Unaware that he is a tailor’s dummy, Arnoux’s guests do not understand the mannequin’s reasoning, which increases their bewilderment and at the same time enhances the grotesquely humorous aspect of the play. For the Mannequin the duel is an absurd farce, and the need to play it is beyond his comprehension. Both women are known for what they are; their ‘honour’ is only a technical term, yet another figure of speech. Consequently the duel is nothing but mystification, necessary, however, to satisfy social convention and the propriety of those who have witnessed what appeared to be intimate scenes. Communication is reduced to euphemistic gibberish covering the dirty tricks of Arnoux and his ‘pack’. It demonstrates how manipulative and ambiguous language can be, how useful for concealing true meaning. It explicitly shows how elevated words and noble phrases can cunningly camouflage the true nature of lowly deeds in the same way as a pleasing appearance may hide a despicable nature.

Humour is an important aspect of the play and contributes considerably to the play’s grotesque character. The device of mannequins imitating humans in itself belongs to comedy, but the mannequins in *The Ball of the Mannequins* are not funny: they are threatening, their hostility to our own world makes us rather grin than laugh wholeheartedly. The most hilarious scenes occur in Act III where a conspicuous visual grotesque exploits its own comic potential. The action moves to the entrance hall in Arnoux’s mansion. Through the window the real, though headless, Leader creeps into the room with the intention of reclaiming his status-head. This entrance is noticed by

Mannequin-Leader who has earlier hidden himself in a knight's suit of armour standing in the corner of the room. Seeing the headless creature, Mannequin-Leader assumes it to be one of his fellow mannequins and feels obliged to warn him that the life of humans is entirely incomprehensible to mannequins and that the newcomer should rather avoid it. In reply the Leader, Ribandell, in fury asks for his head to be returned to him, but Mannequin-Knight is not convinced by the Leader's display of anger and continues to warn him not to get involved with humans. The stage is now occupied by a headless human figure and a suit of knight's armour fighting each other and screaming abuse. This hilarious skirmish is interrupted by Arnoux's servants. As Male Mannequin 1 predicted earlier, the real Leader is not taken seriously by his fellow humans who do not recognise him in the headless creature before them: 'Why the hell do you bother with him? Couldn't you find a better person to talk to? Don't you see that the guy has plastered himself to death?' (186) When Ribandell tries to explain his recent vicissitudes, no one believes his outrageous story. He is laughed at mockingly and eventually pushed out of the window, while the servants rudely deride him: 'There is obviously something wrong with your head. You have forgotten who you are [...] go and look for your head and put it under the tap' (184). The fact that they are dealing with a headless individual does not bother the servants at all, since they believe that the fellow 'gassed' himself to such a degree that he lost his head: 'after all, it is the carnival', says one of them, and being drunk is common at such times. The servants evidently recognise the headless man as one of them ('fellow', 'guy'), which is why they permit themselves familiarity and the use of slang expressions for being drunk ('plastered', 'gassed'), which would be unthinkable in case of someone with a head, that is, with 'a position'. On the other hand, in addressing the Mannequin-Leader the servants are extremely polite: 'Sir, were you kind enough to ring for me?' (194) The irony is that the mannequin did not ring to summon the servant but accidentally pressed a bell. The irony also is that he is a puppet and the servants who are humans treat him with respect, simply because he has an appendage that signifies a position of authority attached to his shoulders.

The comedy of circumstances continues to the very end of the play. While the beginning of the play seems still to be rooted in the threatening universe of Jasieński's earlier works,

where the distinction between the human world and the world of artificial automata is blurred beyond recognition, the hilarious comedy intensifies towards the play's dénouement. Thus the angry, threatening tone of the final monologue comes as a surprise:

Manekin-Leader (podnosząc rękę): *Poczekajcie chwilę! Ten człowiek mówi prawdę! (do Leadera) Drogi panie, nareszcie! Akurat w samą porę. Mało brakowało, abym pana nie poznął (wsuwa mu do ręki pistolet i popycha na swoje miejsce) Proszę, to pańskie miejsce. (szybkim ruchem zdejmuje sobie głowę jak kapelusz) Proszę! Pańska głowa! (podaje głowę Leaderowi) Niech pan bierze. Niech pan przedzej bierze! Ja już mam tego dosyć! Ina co się, doprawdy, połasiłem? ... Kiedy wygrałem głowę, wydało mi się, że znalazłem skarb. A niech was licho z waszymi głowami! Teraz już wiem, do czego wam są potrzebne! ... Ślusznie zadecydowaliśmy, aby temu anansowi obciąć głowę. (wskazuje na Leadera) Czyż jednak zdąła się je obciąć wam wszystkim? Nie starczy nożyc. Zresztą to nie nasza sprawra. Przyjdą tacy, którzy to zrobią lepiej od nas. A nam się zdawało, że wy nam tylko nie dajecie żyć! Lecz jak się okazuje, są jeszcze tacy, którzy chcą się z wami porachować. Widocznie zabrano się do was nie na żarty. To już dugo nie potrwa. No, a tymczasem, skoro tu wszyscy mają głowy, to czemu pan jeden miał by być wyjątkiem? Trzymaj pan! (nasadza głowę Leaderowi na ramiona i przyklepuje ją z wierzchu dlonią, żeby lepiej siedziała, po czym poprawia Leaderowi krawat i podnosi klapę fraka. Do obecnych) Panowie, możecie kontynuować [...]. (1966:208-209)*

Mannequin Leader (raising his hand): Wait a minute! This man speaks the truth! (turning to the Leader) Dear Sir, at last! Just in time. I almost didn't recognise you. (Puts the pistol in his hand and pushes him to his previous place) Here, here is your rightful place. (quickly takes off his head, like a hat) Please, here is your head! (hands the head to the Leader) Take it. Take it quickly! I have had it! And really, I can't see what was so tempting about it before ... When I won this head, I thought I had found a treasure. To hell with your heads! Now I know what you need them for! ... We were right when we decided to cut off this rascal's head. (points towards the Leader) But will we manage to cut off the heads of all of you? There aren't enough scissors to do that. Anyway, it is not our problem. They will come, those who will do it better than we can. And we thought that you make life impossible only for us! It seems though that there are also others who want to settle scores with you. It is no longer a joke. It won't last for long now. And now, well, if all present here have heads, why not you? Have it! (he puts head on the Leader's shoulders and pats it from the top, to fasten it even better, after which he fixes the Leader's tie and straightens the lapels of his frock-coat. Turning to the guests) Gentlemen, you may continue [...]. (1966:208-209)

The fact that the closing speech is delivered by the mannequin is in itself grotesquely ironic, for a puppet is entrusted with preaching a philosophy of life to humans. Seemingly serious in tone at the beginning, the monologue becomes openly ironic ('I can't see what was so tempting in it for me before'), but eventually assumes the tone of a political

manifesto, composed of denunciations and threats. Towards its end the monologue degenerates, however, into a joke, a clownish performance, emphasised by the stage directions. Why, we may ask, did the author who intended to write a political satire choose to end it in clownish bravado? Obviously, because the whole play is an all embracing satire – there is nothing in it that is not subjected to satirical mockery – nothing is serious.

Despite the play being written in a mode of comic grotesque, its denouement is accepted by critics as Jasieński's fiery declaration of his Communist ideals. For instance Stern notes:

Even if we may occasionally find ambiguities in Jasieński's comedy, one thing is unequivocal: the final declaration of the play's hero – the mannequin, addressing all the capitalists gathered at the ball. [...] These are the words we hear at the birth of every revolution. [...] These are the words of the author himself (the mannequin obviously is his *porte-parole*), from the position of the logic of the class struggle. (1969:218)

A similar view is expressed by Volynska, noting that 'the Mannequin-Leader becomes the author's *porte-parole*' and in his words is a 'fervently [uttered] revolutionary prediction'. Almost in the same breath Volynska adds that this 'tendentious statement, a proletarian threat hurled at the world and entirely out of character for the otherwise politically naïve mannequin caught up as it is in its own fantasy of deformation, appears to have little relevance to the rest of the play' (1994:390).

If the final speech is indeed 'entirely out of character' and not relevant to the play, why then does the mannequin refer to his own monologue that ends Act I? He speaks of his vain hopes and wasted illusions. Suddenly the utterly ludicrous dummy with a human head almost evokes our pity. He achieved his 'ultimate happiness' – freedom – only to discover that this 'freedom' is yet another sham. If Stern and Volynska are right, and the Mannequin-Leader is Jasieński's *porte-parole*, is he really saying what they are suggesting?

The main technique of *The Ball of the Mannequins* is that of a game with confused identities, disguises and misrepresentations: headless mannequins that find themselves

superior to people, the real 'leader' without a head, Mannequin-Leader with a human head, then a puppet disguised in a knight's suit of armour, and humans with human heads but lacking those characteristics through which we as readers or spectators would recognise them as our fellow human beings. Because of the grotesque nature of the play, we are never certain what is said in earnest and what is said in jest. There are so many questions and no answers. And yet, despite all the potential meanings which the play generates, this bizarre universe, this tangle of strange circumstances and confused identities, leads to one philosophical reflection – how difficult it is to orient oneself in the modern world and its politics. Who is a real human being and who is only a puppet with human head? Who is a true Communist and who reads only what others have prepared for him to read? Why does the mannequin feel cheated and want revenge? Who are those who will come to avenge him? Will they come and kill humans or merely puppets with human heads? Why would the mannequin only at this final moment speak for the author, when he clearly admits that he himself was duped most of all? Perhaps laughing at everybody, Jasieński laughs at himself most of all? Perhaps this sad ironic laughter – 'When I won this head, I thought I had found a treasure' – and this clownish grotesque jeering, mocks his own naïve belief in the existence of the ideal world, his own inability to see behind the façade of Communist propaganda.

Living in France, Jasieński could not possibly understand what Soviet life was becoming from the time Stalin came to power. He could only perceive the world from the narrow experience of life in the capitalist world. And he hated it. When he was expelled from France and invited to come to the Soviet Union, he thought he had won the real passport to freedom. Arrogantly he looked down on the life he had left behind and entered what he thought was 'a real human world'. After arriving in the Soviet Union, he was 'adored'³⁵ and 'bribed' with responsible positions; he had mentors and advisers. Like the mannequin in a human world, he constantly made errors because he was an outsider in this world and

³⁵ The 'plump woman' who met him in Leningrad with a huge bunch of red roses was Anna Berzin, at the time the wife of an important official in Stalin's government. Jasieński married her soon after his arrival in the Soviet Union when she divorced Berzin (Dziarnowska 1982: 251, 364-366).

did not understand its logic. He accepted the Party's language literally while the Party read between the lines of his pronouncements meanings which Jasieński himself never intended. When Jasieński wrote his first self-criticism in 1930 in response to the accusation of 'national bolshevism'³⁶ (in Jaworski 1995:198), he must have realised that this world was not the world it appeared to be from outside. When Jasieński wanted to go abroad, he was refused permission³⁷ or, as happens to the Mannequin-Leader in the play when he wants to escape from Arnoux's mansion, he is told that 'According to orders from the police, no one is allowed to leave' (187).

There must also be specific significance assigned to the scene in which the mannequin hides in a knight's suit of armour. The scene is emphatically grotesque: the mannequin taken for a human being seeking disguise in a knight-armour creates a complete confusion of identities aiming to deceive the oppressors, the puppet-like humans of this world. One of the most obvious analogies that this image evokes is that of the eternal knight Don Quixote, the transparent symbol of useless idealism. Is it therefore possible that Jasieński tried to hide behind what seemed blind idealism as illustrated in some of his declarations and in those soulless poems in which he expressed his devotion to this new world only to save his life?³⁸ And is that perhaps why he includes for the censors of the play in its last monologue some fiery ideological pronouncements although it is entirely unclear to whom they are addressed? To say that the last monologue is 'out of character' is the same as

³⁶ Sinyavsky explains that 'national bolshevism [is] the first type of Russian fascism, the core of the Soviet State' (1988:264). One has to understand, however, that such expressions were invented in their dozens to justify the extermination of thousands upon thousands of people in the mass paranoia spread by the Soviet propaganda during the thirties. Jasieński himself was also criticised for 'national opportunism' while he criticised Barbusse for 'social fascism' (Jaworski 1995:198). Krejdlín notes: 'Trotskyism, kulak, semikulak, supporter of kulaks – these words led directly to the extermination of over two millions of Soviet citizens. We say "rightist-leftist deviation" (*prawicowo-lewackie*), "revisionism" or "enemies of the people" – and again few thousands of people disappear' (1994:129).

³⁷ Jasieński wanted to go abroad as a correspondent for *Izvestya* but was refused (Dziarnowska 1982:523).

³⁸ For example, *By Way of Autobiography*. These poems are included in the selection of Jasieński's poetry (1972:178-197). See the introduction to Chapter IV.

criticising the language of the play. The Mannequin-Leader is a grotesque figure, not only because he is a mannequin wearing a human head, but also because, being a ludicrous creature, at the end he discovers how illusory were his hopes that having a human head would set him free. It is interesting that of all the attributes of humanity, mannequins want human heads, that is status, and of all the rights humans have, the mannequins envy them only freedom, only to find that this supposed 'freedom' is merely another illusion.

In *By Way of Autobiography*, Jasieński defined the genre of *The Ball of the Mannequins* as a 'grotesque play' and admitted that he was prompted to write it 'because the revolutionary repertoire did not have lighthearted spectacles which would enable proletarian spectators to laugh at the enemy for two hours with healthy and carefree laughter that would give them revolutionary charging' (1972:253). Even if by writing *The Ball of the Mannequins* Jasieński was responding to a legitimate need,³⁹ his play did not have the potential to satisfy that need in the sense in which he apparently envisioned it. It had even less potential to evoke a 'healthy and carefree laughter', as he put it. To the uneducated 'proletarian' audience the play was incomprehensible; it had shown little concern for reality and revolutionary themes, as required by the dictates of socialist realism. The cause of Revolution is promoted by a mannequin wholly unconscious of what he is doing. Jasieński's hope that the play would enable the audience to laugh for 'two hours at the enemy' was as irrational as the play itself, for the identity of the 'enemy' in *The Ball of the Mannequins* is obscure or perhaps even deliberately obfuscated.

The discerning reader had even less reason to laugh, for under the veneer of a superficial and rather simplistic satire at the expense of French Social Democrats, such a reader must have sensed a universal comment on the shallowness of human nature, on the inherent pettiness, greed and vanity of human beings. Apart from explicit doubt about the

³⁹ Ermolaev refers to this in his book *Soviet Literary Theories* by quoting Kirpotin's view expressed during 1934 Congress of Writers that 'Soviet plays had not reached the standards of the best bourgeois drama' (1963:199). Even Stalin was of a similar opinion. In 1929 he wrote in regard to Bulgakov's play *The Days of the Turbins*, that it might be tolerated for the time being 'because we have not enough of our own plays that are suitable for staging' (cited in Kemp-Welch 1991:259).

possibility of identifying people and ideas by what they seem to be, the play alludes to the ongoing power struggle, or as the play expresses it, to the fact that 'the staircase' to power is getting narrower every day and those who do not fit on it are 'breaking their necks'. Cautiously but perceptively summing up the play's unusual nature, Anatol Stern notes that 'in this comedy, more than anywhere else [...], all the pitfalls of ambivalence which are hidden in this very genre of the fantastic grotesque come to the fore' [1969:216].⁴⁰ To think that Jasieński was unaware of these 'pitfalls' would mean that we accept that he did not have basic understanding of writing techniques and that the play is the work of a confused and immature mind, which is hardly Jasieński's case. The impossibility of arriving at a straightforward and unequivocal interpretation of the play made it unsuitable for the Soviet theatre, even if the introduction was written by no less influential a figure than Lunacharsky who defended Jasieński's device of 'the purposefully fantastic', arguing that the improbable world where 'headless mannequins speak [...] although they do not have heads, and see although they do not have eyes', makes Jasieński's satiric targets particularly accurate.⁴¹ The play was never staged in the Soviet Union [Stern 1969:215].⁴² Meyerhold intended to produce it but his creative plans were cut short by his arrest, while the intention to stage the play by the 'unmasked spy Bruno

⁴⁰ Stern adds to this that all of this happens 'of course against the intentions of the author'. Writing his book on Jasieński in 1969 in Poland which was a part of the Soviet bloc, Stern uses this clause for a good reason: the grotesque and official Soviet literature were never on good terms [see Chapter II] Publishing his book, Stern had to balance his integrity against his desire to rehabilitate Jasieński's memory.

⁴¹ Lunacharsky does not explain why, or what 'targets' he has in mind, almost certainly because he was a man of taste and discernment and saw exactly what the play was doing but dared not say so.

⁴² *The Ball of the Mannequins* has been staged outside Russia, although the information varies. Stern mentions England, Japan and Czechoslovakia (in Prague at the Vlasta Burian theatre) in his Introduction to the play published in *Dialog* 2, 1957:17; and 'before the war this play was staged exclusively in the avant-garde theatre of A. E. Burian in Czechoslovakia and in far-off Japan' (1969:215). This information appears also in Kolesnikoff's study (1982:121) but the name of the theatre director is misprinted and it appears as 'Bucharian avant-garde theatre in Prague'. Gerould, briefly commenting on Jasieński's play, says: 'During the inter-war years, *The Ball of the Mannequins* was performed only in Japan and in Czechoslovakia, where it was directed by the famous Czech constructivist Emil František Burian' [1977:46].

Jasieński' was taken as further proof of his departure from the ideals of Soviet theatre and Soviet reality [in Annenkov 1966:II/94-95].⁴³

***Bravery*⁴⁴ – ‘The Unusual Story’**

Dziarnowska's is thus far the only study to report that Jasieński concluded a provisional contract with the Soviet publishing house *Sovetsky pisatel'* with the intention of publishing a collection of stories under the title ‘Niezwykłe opowiadania’ (‘Unusual Stories’) (1982:498).⁴⁵ Three such stories were completed and published separately in Soviet literary journals. *Мужество* (‘Bravery’) and *Главный виновник* (‘The Chief Culprit’) were published in *Novy mir*, *Hoc* (‘The Nose’) was published in *Izvestya*.⁴⁶

While both *The Chief Culprit* and *The Nose* have been acknowledged as grotesques and satires (see Stern 1969:187; Dziarnowska 1982:489-498; Kolesnikoff 1982:85, 110-124), *Bravery* is unanimously defined as an exemplary socialist realist work. Stern maintains that ‘no evidence of the grotesque that always fascinated Jasieński so much’ can be found in this story which meticulously reproduces the everyday life of the Soviet Union and its new

⁴³ Анненков, Юрий. *Дневник моих вспоминаний. Цикл трагедий*. Vols I & II. New York, 1966.

⁴⁴ The translation of the title as used by Kolesnikoff (1982:110). In this study, reference is made to ‘Męstwo’ published in Polish, translated from Russian by Zofia Dudzińska i Grzegorz Lasota in Bruno Jasieński, ‘Nogi Izoldy Morgan’ i inne utwory poetyckie (1966:71-94). In this section, all quotations from this source are indicated by the page number only.

⁴⁵ This proves that he was not prepared to give in to the pressure of attacks directed at him for using a literary genre which bordered on the grotesque and the fantastic (see Dziarnowska 1982:498; Stern 1969:220).

⁴⁶ *Новый мир* 1935 (2), pp. 5-16 and 1936(6), pp. 5-15; *Известия* 1936-(36-41), respectively (as in Kolesnikoff 1982:142). The stories have been briefly summarised in my essay ‘The Art of Bruno Jasieński’ in *Jewish Affairs* 1996(51):1. In this study, reference is made to the Polish translation of the stories in Jasieński, ‘The Legs of Isolda Morgan’ and Other Stories as ‘Męstwo’, ‘Главный виновник’ and ‘Nos’(1966).

morality.⁴⁷ Although the story is neither satiric nor grotesque in the same sense as the other two stories, the view that it is realistic, especially in the terms required by socialist realism, is equally unacceptable. It is an 'unusual' story and although its artistic value is limited, *Bravery* proves yet again that the mind of the writer of the grotesque is at work here as much as it is in the remaining two 'unusual stories'.

Bravery is an exemplary illustration of *чрезвычайные обстоятельства*, 'extraordinary circumstances',⁴⁸ as Gogol used to say, or what Yury Mann calls 'fantastic supposition' which, in his view, is the point of departure for certain types of the grotesque and facilitates satiric exposition of reality. Mann explains that the 'extraordinariness' of circumstances creates the 'acceleration' of the action and exposes an unusual – as opposed to normal – tension in the situation of the characters, who are placed in a position delimited by the question: 'What would happen if we were faced with an unusual event?' (1966:90-91). Closely related to this is the artificially limited place of action.⁴⁹ The action of *Bravery* takes place on board an aircraft carrying Varya – a pregnant Komsomol girl – and three men: the young Komsomol activist Misha, the director of a factory Comrade Onufrev, and Losev – another Party official who appears to be a womaniser and a hypocrite and who is responsible for Varya's pregnancy. The isolation of all these people from life is not merely implicit, it is explicitly pointed out by the narrator in the opening paragraph:

⁴⁷ In all fairness to Stern, he notes that 'this new morality evokes – certainly against the author's own wish – no less shock than the morality shown earlier by Jasieński in the crooked mirror of the grotesque. Such is for instance the scene where the young Komsomol-worker, seduced by a factory engineer, asks her Komsomol comrades whether she should give birth to a child or not, since he is an element foreign to the working class' (1969:220).

⁴⁸ This obviously contradicts the requirement formulated by Engels that literature should show the 'typical hero in typical circumstances'. Jasieński, who was aware of this requirement, interpreted it in his own unique way (see Chapter III).

⁴⁹ See Eikhenbaum: 'The grotesque style requires first, that the situation or event described be confined to a limited world of artificial experiences [...] utterly closed off from concrete reality' (1982:32). Although Eikhenbaum has in mind spiritual more than physical isolation, his definition of the grotesque style emphasises an important aspect of the grotesque universe. Compare this with the views of Jennings on the grotesque situation (1963:19-20).

W ciasnej kabinie niewielkiego samolotu było ich pięcioro. Rozmieszczone po obu stronach okna wypełniała błękitna pustka. Dawno zostały w tyle prostokąty znajomych fabrycznych budynków i teraz rozciągała się w dole zielona równina, podobna do rozesłanej – żeby miękko można było opaść – pikowanej kołdry. (1966:73)

There were five of them, sitting in the confined space of an aircraft cabin. The small windows on both sides were filled with blue emptiness. The familiar squares of factory buildings had been left behind long ago and now the expanses of green plain were spread down below – to make the soft downfall possible – like a quilt.

From the perspective of the enclosed space of the aircraft the earth looks cosy and safe, nevertheless the omniscient narrator contemplates the possibility of an aircraft falling down. The embryonic plot is based on an anecdote-like situation – four passengers are confronted with a crisis situation when the pilot suddenly dies of a heart attack. The passengers are aware of their fate: 'Everything was as it had been ten minutes before: the aircraft flew softly, without losing speed; only the human beings inside it knew that they would never touch ground again' (85). None of them knows how to land an aircraft and there is only one parachute which belongs to Misha, an amateur parachutist.

The next paragraph describes Onufrev's landing with the parachute while the aircraft crashes: 'He looked up into the sky. It was blue and limitless. He could not see the aircraft. Perhaps it had never been there? All this was a hideous, agonising dream.' (85) But the next day, the newspaper confirms the aircraft crash and the death of all its passengers. What happened in the split second before the crash no one will ever know. The only version is the one given to the press by Onufrev who miraculously survived the crash, in which he claims that he drew the lot which gave him the right to use the parachute. Fate, however, is against him. When Onufrev's briefcase is found after the crash, it contains a note in which he wrote to his young wife, informing her that Varya won the parachute. His version changes; he admits the truth publicly and says that Varya and Misha pushed him out because they considered his life to be more valuable than theirs. The fact that Onufrev conceals the truth means that he was not comfortable with the actual events; he felt ashamed that he survived instead of a pregnant girl. Although the comrades forgive him for initially concealing the truth, his wife does not – not because she disagrees

with Varya's reasoning that Onufrev's life is more valuable but because, by lying, he has denied Varya and Misha their claim to heroism.

It is impossible to accept this chain of bizarre events at face value as a merely realistic presentation done with the intention to uplift the readers of the story. The plot itself looks as it originates in an anecdote; many such anecdotes are popular today.⁵⁰ The 'seriousness' of this excessive accumulation of extraordinary events must therefore be accepted cautiously and assessed rather as a ludicrous background against which difficult moral dilemmas evolve. Although the mind of the writer of the grotesque seems to be present in the relating of the events – the secrecy, the ambivalence, the unusual circumstances – the grotesque is subtle and disguised by the story's seemingly serious tone.⁵¹ Even the story's characters do not laugh. Thus, looking at the 'caricature' of Onufrev on the first page of a factory bulletin, 'Misha with difficulty refrained from laughing: did they imitate him well! His hardly visible baldness, as if incidentally covered with a graying strand of hair, and his nose slightly deformed – everything the same. It was inappropriate to laugh in the presence of Onufrev, even if he was not seeing it' (73). The comment might be a concealed satire on the officious seriousness of the totalitarian state where drawing a caricature of a Party official equalled treason. The narrator uses the word 'caricature' twice, and 'playful drawing' once, contradicting his own emphasis that 'everything is exactly the same' as the way Onufrev looks.

Although the story does not make emphatically satiric statements, it conveys implicit criticism. The author exposes the true nature of the characters by forcing them to face

⁵⁰ The anecdote operates in a similar way to the popular question-and-answer in English-speaking countries, 'Knock, knock... who's there?' It usually concerns three or four politicians of various nationalities who find themselves on board a plane; there is only one parachute and the question is posed to the listeners, who should use it? The final answer usually wittily captures an actual political situation.

⁵¹ See: Jennings for whom 'fearsome and ludicrous' are central to his concept of the grotesque: (1963:15); Mc Elroy (1989:12) and Thomson (1972:21) also state this view; Kayser, although he admits that the role of laughter is one of the most difficult aspects of the grotesque, does not deny that its presence is essential (1981:187)

extraordinary circumstances. The device identified by Mann as 'fantastic supposition' creates a hypothetical situation in which the character of each person is revealed. Facing death Varya and Misha behave like true heroes, Losev is exposed as a hypocrite and a despicable careerist. His character is exposed also through the affair he had with Varya: he has lured the young girl into the relationship with pseudo-intellectual verbosity and ideological clichés about 'new people' and 'new morality', but when she falls pregnant he switches to the explanation that 'the maternal instincts enslave women, [...] and as an emancipated true proletarian' she must resist that instinct and abort the pregnancy (77). The language yet again is exposed as meaningless, ideologically charged words are used as a cover-up, in this case for the selfishness and lack of commitment. But on the other hand, Losev is a good specialist, whose expertise is needed and respected. The integrity of the prominent party official Onufrev, given all we eventually learn about him, is also hardly commendable. From the start he is portrayed as being far from an ideal Soviet role model. Although his contribution to the Revolution is emphasised, he seems to be vain; his wife is much younger, he conceals his baldness and his age. He is childishly competitive, which is seen in the way he approaches a friendly game of chess with Losev who, knowing this weakness of the director Onufrev, deliberately loses the game in order to win his favour (Losev wants to leave the factory where he is being victimised because of his affair with Varya). The story proves that the membership of the Communist Party does not free one from fear, hypocrisy, vanity or cowardice. In the end, Onufrev appears to be driven by fear and guilt, but he is a survivor, not because he survived the crash but because of the way he dealt with it. He is the one whose judgement is left to the reader.

As the story does not provide clear-cut examples of virtue, it cannot be accepted as socialist realism. Its positive heroes, the enthusiastic but narcissistic Misha,⁵² and the honest but gullible Varya, die. Moreover, they would die in vain, that is, their heroism would remain unacknowledged, if Onufrev were not forced to reveal the truth. The people of the older generation do not provide the example and moral guidance expected of them

⁵² Misha is portrayed as having 'neither a good figure nor a handsome face'. Nevertheless, 'more than once, looking at his snub nose in the scratched mirror, he was overcome with amazement that this was he, Misha – the same Misha Pokalyuk about whom they write in newspapers' (1966:74).

by Soviet society. Their authority relies heavily on their prerevolutionary achievements and their contribution to the ultimate victory of Communism. This is the way Losev conquered the heart of Varya, and this is how Onufrev maintains his relationship with his wife: ‘Initially Onufrev tried to balance the age difference with his prerevolutionary experience [in the struggle]’ (80). However, their contribution to building Communism is constantly questioned, for one is never certain when even a seemingly dedicated Communist will be ‘unmasked as a harmful element’ as was the case with Losev, or Ryzhov *alias* Panteleyev. The young people are used and manipulated by their older comrades.

Instead of a positive outlook on the prospects for Communist development projects, the atmosphere of the story is threatening. For instance, in climbing up the party ladder, Misha comes close to ‘breaking his neck’ (*zwycięstwo nie przyszło mu łatwo, o mało nie skręcił przy tej okazji karku*, ‘the victory did not come easy, he almost broke his neck’ [74])⁵³ when someone implicated him in sabotage. That ‘someone’ was soon ‘unmasked’ as the son of a *kulak* who under an assumed name was admitted to work in a factory (75). Another unacceptable aspect of the story, from the perspective of socialist realism – was the story’s main theme itself: a catastrophe. And it is precisely here that – extrinsically at least – ludicrous grotesque humour enters. Dziarnowska cites the following incident in respect of the reception of *Bravery* in the Soviet press:

[...] the literary press was silent with the exception of a letter from a reader, published in *Pravda*, claiming that the story did not make sense because its author had no idea how an aircraft is constructed nor was he aware that it is impossible to open the door of the machine while it is in flight and that in a Soviet passenger aircraft the pilot cannot die of heart attack, because he undergoes a thorough medical examination every time he is going to fly. *The Unlikely Story* was the title. And that was all. (1982:491).

Dziarnowska’s reference to this letter illustrates the intellectual atmosphere that surrounded literature in the Soviet Union in the second half of the nineteen-thirties.⁵⁴ The

⁵³ We may recall here the comments of the ‘Delegates’ in *The Ball of the Mannequins*, as quoted earlier.

⁵⁴ Anticipating such a vulgar approach to literature, Gogol in *Leaving the Theatre...* (an ‘after-play’ to *The Inspector General*) ridicules it brilliantly, attributing the comment about the author

writers did not dare to express their views openly, uneducated readers could not bother to read between the lines, they needed 'true to life' plausible and familiar stories. The 'fantastic supposition' of this story defies the realism which the reader of *Bravery* expected. The author of the letter to *Pravda* did not understand that the story was concerned neither with the plot nor its plausible development, nor with the intricacies of aircraft engineering. Dziarnowska makes yet another valuable observation, pointing out that in the officially published Russian literature of the time there were few works, if any, which would not have a ready answer to the question about whether Onufrev's life was really more valuable than Varya's (1982:490), which is without a doubt the key question of the story.

For Jasieński the problem of the value of life in the context of ideology emerged long before: in the *Lay of Jakub Szela*, especially its stage production, in *I Burn Paris*, in *The Ball of the Mannequins*. He kept avoiding answering it directly, although seeing the easiness with which blood poured, heads rolled and thousands of people died in his earlier works, the reader might suppose that the author was weighing ideology against the life of an individual. It is difficult to answer what Jasieński as an individual thought, for the grotesque ambivalence of most of his works prevents reaching an unequivocal conclusion. That is the point which was made right at the beginning of this study, that it is impossible to categorise the author of the grotesque. We can only note the constant tension in his works between his abstract humanism, his belief that it is possible to attain an ideal world – which made him an idealist, and his rejection of life as it is – which made him lose the perspective of life of a real human being, an individual like himself. *Bravery* is the first of Jasieński's works in which we notice this tension easing and the face of a real human being emerging from the nameless masses. This tendency is already fully established in *The Nose*, in which Jasieński openly questions ideology as a force which should determine a person's right to life.

of the play to the Voice of an Angry but Obviously Experienced Civil Servant: 'What does he know? Not a damn thing. And he is lying, lying; everything he wrote, it's all a pack of lies. That's not even the way you take bribes, if you get right down to it...' (1990:84).

The story *Bravery* does not deal with faceless crowds or puppets but with individuals in a dramatic, even though hypothetical, situation. It is an open-ended story: the fact that the collective forgives Onufrev does not prove that Onufrev was justified in accepting Varya's gift of life. Fate chose Varya, in the first place, and fate revealed the truth – the briefcase survived the burning aircraft (88). 'Fate' here clearly overwrites Communist logic. On these premises the reader must find an answer in his own conscience, as well as decide whether the title of the story should be accepted at face value or with an ironic question mark. Making his story seem 'realistic', Jasieński deceived readers and even scholars who, like Kolesnikoff, consider it 'subordinated to the utilitarian requirement that literature should offer a didactic illustration of ideological premises and patterns of behaviour' and who maintain that 'the moral problem facing Sergey Onufrev, the protagonist of *Bravery*, is very simple. It has to do with basic honesty' (1982:110-111). Jasieński anticipated such a reading; that is why Onufrev himself explicitly contests it: 'I should simply say how it was. But this "simply" is not simple at all...' (1966:89).

*The Chief Culprit*⁵⁵

The Chief Culprit can be interpreted both as a satire which mocks the world through the crooked mirror of the grotesque, or as a grotesque that leads to a satiric effect. Either way it is a powerful statement against the eternal and most self-defeating tendency in humankind, the tendency which makes man conceive the most efficient way of killing another man. Commenting briefly on *The Chief Culprit*, Dziarnowska notes that it 'balances on the verge of the grotesque' (1982:497) while Stern classifies it as 'the grotesque inspired by political passion' and maintains that the satire is directed at 'the

⁵⁵ In this study reference is made to 'Główny winowajca' published in Polish, translated from Russian by Zofia Dudzińska and Grzegorz Lasota, in Bruno Jasieński, 'Nogi Izoldy Morgan' i inne utwory poetyckie(1966:95-116). All quotations from this source are indicated by the page number only.

judiciary of the Polish *sanacja*⁵⁶ regime' (1969:219). Volynska considers the story, along with *The Nose*, a 'prose gem', in which Jasieński 'insists on hallucinatory, preposterous malformations of life in order to arrive at socially universal as well as individually human satirical profiles' (1994:395). But assessing the story, neither of the scholars sufficiently justifies their views.

According to the subdivision suggested by Petro (1982), the story can be classified as an 'anti-militarist satire' that relies on irony, gallows humour and the grotesque. The protagonist is an anonymous individual, representing both himself with all his personal obsessions, and an unspecified 'grey' mass of people who have nothing to say about the way they lead their lives. The title of the story refers to the masses of people who want to live in peace – 'the chief culprit of moral resistance' (103). The economic power of the enemy is also measured by the number of its masses, which is why the masses – 'the civilian population, the chief culprit, must irrevocably be destroyed' (104). The chief culprit is also the chief character – an insignificant man, the likes of whom make up the masses: 'After reading the article he was dumbfounded: he realised that he was a chief culprit whose destruction was being masterminded by the biggest brains in military headquarters' (103). As an individual he is doomed by the system long before his actual conviction in the ludicrous process against participants in an ongoing anti-war campaign, which ends the story (116).

The universe created in this story is grotesque. Initially it is the illusory world of the protagonist's dream – a terrifying recurring vision about his life in the trenches. It is so vivid and real that the protagonist has difficulty in distinguishing between reality and nightmare:

⁵⁶ *Sanacja* (from Latin *sano* 'to heal') is a term accepted by historians to describe the rule of Marshal Piłsudski after his 1926 *Putsch* which claimed to be healing the Polish state from the devastation of partition and economic disaster (see Miłosz 1983:383).

... *Obudził się z łany potem, z twarzą oblepioną startą w proch słomą. Wciśnięty w pościel, rozdarł paznokciami poduszkę. Długo siedział dysząc głośno. Nie mógł zdać sobie sprawy, co się z nim dzieje. Znów ten natrętny koszmar!* (1966:98)

... He woke up wet with sweat, with his face coated in straw dust.⁵⁷ Pressed into the bed linen, he tore the pillow with his fingernails. Then he sat for a long time breathing heavily. He could not grasp what was happening. Again this obsessive nightmare!

This is also the real world, historically and geographically identifiable. The action takes place in the interbellum period in Warsaw. The political leader Marshal Józef Piłsudski is identified through his well-known in Polish nickname *Dziadek*, that is, 'Grandfather', earned by his lavish moustaches; reference is also made to his 1926 *coup d'état* (see footnote 56). However, this real world is so menacing that it does not differ from a ludicrous nightmare. Even during peace time the theme of war dominates press articles, conversations at work, and social gatherings. Everyone talks about how to defend oneself during attacks from air, land and sea. People are forced to participate in self-defence programmes, they 'diligently pull on pig snouts of gas-masks' which make them look ridiculous, as is the case with one of the characters qualified by his looks as an 'anteater'. The scientists who are not busy inventing new, more accurate and more efficient weapons spend time inventing special 'cradle-suitcases supplied with oxygen, to be used as gas-masks for infants in case of an attack, as advertised to the public in beautiful slogans' (105). The press debates the effectiveness of all these devices, proving them uniformly useless.

The intensely ironic tone of the narrative is maintained throughout. Thus, soon after one war has ended, another began. As there was no comfort for the main character in his dream, there is no comfort in reality. Although people tell him that this one is a different war, he does not believe them; he has had enough of all the wars and is not interested in any cause. He is called a traitor and is forced to give up his job. He is swept by the fever of war which consumes the society:

⁵⁷ Here the reference is made to the straw mattress, on which the protagonist sleeps.

Zamkną się w domu i próbował przeczekać. Miał jakieś tam oszczędności, dostatecznie, żeby przeżyć. Był jeszcze w tym czasie naiwniakiem – wierzył, że może zostawią go w spokoju.

Znaleziono go w domu i wręczono kartę mobilizacyjną. Na ulicach rozkudłane matrony urządzali łapanki na młodych ludzi w cywiliu i odprowadzały ich na najbliższy posterunek policji, zdzierając im po drodze krawaty. Nie było się gdzie schować. Wystarczyło wysunąć tylko nos na jakąś ulicę, a każda zatrzaskiwała się natychmiast, jak pułapka na myszy. (1966:99)

He locked himself up in his flat and tried to wait. He had some savings, just enough to survive. At that time he still was naïve – he believed they would leave him alone.

They found him at home and handed over the mobilization order. On the street dishevelled staid women were organising roundups of young men in civilian clothes and taking them to the nearest police station, on the way pulling off their ties. There was no place to hide. It was enough to put a nose out into the street, and every time it snapped immediately, like a mousetrap.

When the protagonist is arrested, his metaphoric feeling of being trapped is reinforced by his physical confinement. In prison he lives the absurd life of an innocent man who in order to save himself from torture must fabricate his alleged crimes. And when his fabrication is unmasked in court by the advocate of another defendant, he is sentenced to death, presumably for exposing the justice system for what it is. Ironically, only for a brief moment, when he hears the accusations directed at him, he undergoes a metamorphosis, and from a browbeaten terrified man he becomes a hero, his life gains a purpose, for the first time he senses that his hate of war is shared by many other people, and with pride he admits in court his participation in the invented clandestine movement. When his deceit is exposed, he is devastated because, just as the system needed him as an enemy to justify its existence, so he needed the absurd invention for his life to have meaning.

The forces perceived by the protagonist as antagonistic are referred to as ‘they’, ‘someone’, ‘gentlemen of the military’, ‘the press’, ‘scientists’, ‘some general, whose name is difficult to pronounce’ and ‘the general Powderu whose name derived from “powder” is easy to remember’ (104). The lurking evil powers promoting war seem to be omnipresent and omnipotent. As was the case in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan* and as they are seen in P’an’s perspective of the European culture in *I Burn Paris*, on the antagonistic side are all machines and technology, as well as science:

Gazety codziennie przynosiły oszokamiające wieści o nowych supersilnych krążownikach, czołgach i bombowcach. Z ekranów kinowych wielopiętrowe pancerniki powoli zwracały na niego paszcze swoich działa. Wszystkie karabiny maszynowe i działa świata skierowane na niego, czekały tylko na umówiony sygnał. Nonsense było marzyć o ocaleniu. (1966:103)

Every day the newspapers brought stupefying news about super-powerful cruisers, tanks and bombers. From cinema screens, many-storeyed armoured ships were slowly turning their muzzles directly at him. All the automatic rifles and cannons in the whole world were directed at him, only waiting for the signal to fire. It was nonsensical to dream of surviving.

Occasionally we have the impression that the situation of the protagonist is similar to the one of the Mannequin-Leader among the people gathered at Arnoux's house in *The Ball of the Mannequins*: although he looked similar, uttered the same words and made similar gestures as humans, he did not belong to this world. The protagonist of *The Chief Culprit* is completely alienated from the society in which he lives. He does not understand the reasoning of other people. But the way he is presented by the narrator does not inspire our sympathy, he reminds us of a puppet: after being wounded in a war, he passes through a hospital where he is patched up like a doll; his nose is saved but he loses one eye. A glass eye is fitted, which looked even better than the real one, 'it had more expression' (100-101). Like the mannequins, he too is concerned with his appearance:

Kiedy wrócił do domu i obejrzał w lustrze swoją jakby zmiętą twarz z bojaźniewytrzeszczonym okiem, zrobiło mu się trochę nieswojo. Pozbawili go nawet tego, co kiedyś tak bardzo sobie cenił, odebrali mu przy pomocy noża chirurgicznego podstawę sukcesów życiowych – ujmującą powierzchowność. (1966:101)

When he returned home from hospital and saw his creased face with one fearfully gaping eye in a mirror, he felt a little uncomfortable. They had taken away from him even what he was so proud of; with a surgeon's scalpel they had taken from him the foundation of his success in life – his pleasing appearance.

Like an insignificant marionette, a plaything in someone else's hands, he does not have a name. But only very few characters are singled out as having identity. One of them is Głowak, who was an 'idiot' because instead of waiting until he was killed in a battle, hanged himself in the lavatory of his army barracks:

Rano na pryczy Główaka nie było. Znaleziono go w klozecie, kiedy oddział zbierał się do wymarszu. Wisiał na pasku od spodni zaczepionym na rączce rezerwuaru – długie i niezgrabne, w kalesonach, z fioletową szramą na lewym policzku po ranie od odłamka szrapnela. Woda płynęła szemrząc i obmywając duże palce jego kościstych nóg.

I tak pozostał w pamięci: długie i wyprężone, jakby stał w wodzie na palcach. [...] W nocy Jan Główak, długie i boso, z fioletową szramą przez policzek szedł na palcach po szumiącej wodzie, jak Chrystus. (1966:100)

In the morning Główak was not in his bed. He was found in a lavatory when the detachment was ready to leave for a battle. He was hanging by the belt of his pants, affixed to the water tank handle – long and shapeless in his drawers, with a purple scar from his shrapnel wound to his left cheek. The water was flowing, murmuring, and washing the toes of his bony feet.

And this is how he stayed in his memory: long and stiff, as if he were standing on the water.

[...] At night Jan Główak, long and barefoot, with a purple scar on his cheek, walked on the murmuring water, like Christ.

Główak is compared to Christ, but the circumstances under which and the place where he hangs himself do not fit the pathos surrounding the figure of Christ. The comparison is grotesquely ironic, but the simile is double-edged. On the one hand the pitiful figure of a hanging man only *resembles* Christ as frequently seen in icons and paintings and, on the other hand, in his innocence, Główak *is* Christ, because he refuses to be a pawn in the slaughter organised by others. Our hero does not follow him, because he fears death more than he fears killing others. That is why the grotesque figure of Główak's corpse is given a name,⁵⁸ while the 'main hero' remains anonymous.

The other named character in the story is Jagielski – 'the bald fat man looking like an anteater in a brown overcoat' (105). These two named characters contribute to the final demise of the main character who, drinking a beer with Jagielski, tells him about Główak's philosophy of life: 'they will not rest until they kill all of us' (106). The conversation is

⁵⁸ Główak might after all be a real person. As the narrative states later, he hanged himself in 1920 (1966:107). At that time Jasieński was in the army and such an incident might very well have taken place in reality. As Jasieński notes in his 'Last Testimony', his own army experience in the Chełmno Military College in 1920 was extremely unpleasant ('two of four months I spent in a dark cell'). He was 'bullied and almost had to face a military court' (in Jaworski 1995:149). Jaworski, relying on the information of the poet's brother, fills in that while in Chełmno Jasieński organised 'futuristic soirées' where he read inflammatory poems (*ibid.*:11-12). The 1920 date is significant also for another reason – it was the year of the war between Poland and Communist Russia.

overheard by an ‘enterprising man in an elegant jacket’ who joins the conversation, both interested in the topic and wanting to know more about these ‘very reasonable, sober thinking people’. He finds out that Głowak is no longer ‘here’, he is ‘there, where we all should be – for that is the only place to be for a thinking person’ (106). In the world portrayed in this story, it is better not to have names. Thus, although the name of the protagonist is not revealed to the reader, it is revealed to the ‘enterprising man’, and leads to the protagonist’s subsequent arrest. Having no idea how to deal with torture and the interrogations which aim to force him to confess the names of other members of the ‘illegal antiwar organisation’ as well as details of Głowak’s whereabouts, since the police are convinced that ‘there’ means the Soviet Union and they will not accept the explanation that he is dead (107), the protagonist gives the names of people from the telephone directory, fragments of which he has found in the prison lavatory. When the hoax is exposed during the court procedure, people cancel their telephone subscriptions, so their names will no longer appear in the telephone directory.

The universe of the story is peopled mostly with appearances whose identity is either not known or is deceptive. An elegant, ‘enterprising’ and markedly friendly man is a spy who reports on the protagonist; an innocent conversation with an acquaintance is taken for encoded plotting. When the protagonist is arrested, his defender is convinced of his guilt, and he prepares his defence not with the intention to prove that the protagonist is innocent, but – ironically – to ask mercy because of his contribution to the country in defending it during the war. The fact that everything that is being said is misunderstood and misinterpreted generates a profoundly ironic twist not only to the narrative but also to life itself. Thus the phrase with which the spy approaches the protagonist, that he needs his address because he does not want ‘to lose contact with soberly thinking people’, is aimed at obtaining his address so he may be arrested, the friendly handshake has the significance of the kiss of Judas, and the protagonist’s explanation that Głowak is ‘there’ is interpreted as Głowak being in the Soviet Union while in fact the man has been long

dead.⁵⁹ Irony affects also the jargon of the press which relies on euphemistic and elevated slogans such as 'historical necessity' and 'outposts of Western civilisation' (101) to cover up the aggressive policy towards the Soviet Union.

The irony affects the whole narrative, occasionally producing an effect of gallows humour. Thus the narrator cynically informs us that the protagonist 'luckily was poisoned with gas' (98) and that losing an eye might have been a spot of luck for the hero, in that it gave him some hope of not being called to the war again: 'perhaps now that he has only one eye they will finally leave him alone, and will not rush him to war. Anyhow, if one thinks about it, one closes the left eye when shooting a rifle, which means that a soldier does not need it' (101). The narrator's logic and his bizarre sense of luck is so different from ours that certain passages have to be read several times. Irony affects every bit of the protagonist's life. Thus having only one eye is interpreted by others as a sign of his heroism and on those grounds he wins the favour of a young girl whom he eventually marries. But as he enjoys his first morning as a married man, a stray bullet comes through the window and breaks a jar of jam.⁶⁰ His marital bliss does not last long, as his wife, disenchanted with her husband, gets herself a lover – a proper army officer. Society expects the husband to defend his honour. Although the officer is ready to 'give him satisfaction', that is, to fight a duel, our hero, known for his obsessive fear of fighting, recalls that 'not long ago, an officer cut a civilian to pieces on the street. The civilian allegedly poked the officer accidentally, or in some other way had shown lack of respect. The officer was acquitted by the court as defending the honour of his uniform' (102). Irony is the major factor in the protagonist's life: ironically, he was born at a wrong time, full of wars; ironically, he survived the war to relive its horrors for the rest of his life; ironically, he was an inconspicuous average man, with no ambition for heroism, but society expected him to put his life on the line; he was married to the wrong woman who married him for wrong

⁵⁹ The irony is double: it exposes the misinterpretation but it also makes clear an ideological point that by comparison with the military regime in Poland, the Soviet Union is indeed 'the other world' – that is, heaven.

⁶⁰ This is the reference to the 12 May 1926 *Putsch* by Piłsudski (see A. Zamoyski, *The Polish Way*, Toronto 1988:341-342).

reason, and when she betrayed him, people expected him to defend *his* honour as if it was him who committed adultery: 'He did not obtain satisfaction from the officer, he fell even lower in the estimation of his wife, who was implacable in the matters of male honour' (102). This web of ironies enmeshing his life continues until his execution: he hopes that he will be hanged, but as a gesture of mercy his penalty was converted from hanging to death by firing squad.

However, the greatest irony and the main purpose of the narrative is that so much effort – intellectual and financial – is put into devising the most efficient defence, but no one thinks of the simplest, yet by far the best solution: to prevent the war. One easily grasps the tale's implied ideal, the norm which the author has in mind – peace. One of the strongest points of Communist propaganda was the promise that when equality and justice would finally reign in the world – that is, when Communism achieved its final victory – there would be no more wars. But until then everyone was expected to 'fight for peace', to be a 'rank and file soldier' defending Communism to the last drop of blood and so forth. The whole rhetoric of totalitarian language was based on military jargon.⁶¹ Thus the satire in *The Chief Culprit* is aimed as much at Western militarism as at Stalinist war propaganda. But this point is made subtly in the narrative, while the emphasis is on the protagonist's fear, on his isolation and lack of interest in any cause. The protagonist does not differentiate between the war against Communism and the war for Communism; neither does the narrative imply that he should. The moral of the story is that any war is against the people, 'the grey masses', while victory belongs to those who are high up on the socio-political ladder, and serve only their egotistical ambitions.

⁶¹ See, for instance: 'The Function of Imagery in the Soviet Press' by Lyndall Morgan in *AULLA XXI: Proceedings and Papers*. Massey University. 1982: 369-384. Military jargon permeates Stalin's own speeches, beginning with his oration at Lenin's funeral: *Товарищи! Мы, коммунисты, – люди особого склада. Мы, – те, которые составляем армию великого стратега, армию товарища Ленина. Нет ничего выше, чем честь принадлежать к этой армии.* 'Comrades! We, Communists, are people of specific constitution. We are those who make up the army of the great strategist, the army of comrade Lenin. There is nothing more noble than an honour of belonging to this army' (in Morgan 1982:384).

In the end, the satiric impact of the story was too universal, too humanitarian and too pacifist, to satisfy the requirements of Communist ideology at the time, especially in view of the widespread war propaganda in the Soviet Union itself. Moreover, from the view of the *glavlit* – the official Soviet censorship – the story's focus on militarist totalitarianism drew unnecessarily attention to this propaganda. Although the historical circumstances and the place of the action clearly identify Poland, the story's grotesque nature rendered this fact insignificant and encouraged the Soviet reader to apply his imagination according to his own life experience. In grotesque works the real and tangible parameters of the action are not important; the ludicrous, semi-real and semi-illusory universe which they help to create is, because of its inherent ambivalence and its availability to generalisation. *The Chief Culprit* published in 1936, aimed thus not only at the Polish militant regime, but indirectly pointed at Stalin's internal policies while the ludicrous trial of the 'chief culprit' was an open analogy to staged trials taking place in Soviet Russia.⁶²

*The Nose*⁶³

This story marks the first time Jasieński openly acknowledges his indebtedness to the great Russian master of the literary grotesque, Nikolay Gogol. He adopts not only the title of Gogol's own short story 'The Nose', published as one of his *St Petersburg Stories* in 1836, but also quotes a fragment from it as an epigraph to his own tale:

Но что страннее, что непонятнее всего, это то, как авторы могут брать подобные сюжеты?
... а все однако же как поразмыслишь, во всем этом, право, есть что-то. Кто что ни говори, а подобные происшествия бывают на свете, редко но бывают.
 (Гоголь 1936:260; compare Ясенский 1936[36])

⁶² This point becomes clear in the context of Sinyavsky's *Soviet Civilisation*, especially Ch. 4 'Stalin: The State-Church' (1994:81-114).

⁶³ In this study the reference is made to Ясенский, Бруно: 'Нос' *Известия*, 1936, Nos. 36-39. The story appears also in Polish translation from Russian by Wacława Komarnicka as 'Nos' in: Bruno Jasieński, 'Nogi Izoldy Morgan' i inne utwory poetyckie (1966:37-70).

But what is strange, stranger than anything else, is how writers can chose a theme like this? ... however, if one thinks this over, there is something in it; yes. Let people say what they like, but things like this happen in the world – seldom, but they do happen.
 (Gogol 1936:260; compare Jasieński 1936[36])

Gogol's story portrays the dilemma of a socially ambitious collegiate assessor, Kovalev, whose nose assumes an independent existence after it mysteriously disappears from its owner's face. The chief narrative feature of Gogol's tale is that Kovalev's weird adventure is described by its narrator without astonishment and curiosity, let alone scepticism. Indeed, as seen in the fragment which Jasieński used as an epigraph, the narrator seems firmly to believe in the probability of such events occasionally taking place.

Jasieński read Gogol's story as the satirist's mocking laughter at the importance people ascribe to physical appearance, for without his nose, Kovalev loses both his manhood and his social status. Jasieński's own story is also *inter alia* about the prominence given to appearance at the expense of inner qualities, but his laughter, unlike Gogol's, is darkened with premonitions of true horror. In Jasieński's story the laughter becomes a contortion, for it is not only the hero's manhood and status that are threatened, but his very life.

The fantastic events which form the core of this story's plot are intended to expose the absurdities of real life. The satire in Jasieński's short story *The Nose* is directed at the Fascist ideology of inherited racial superiority. The point should be made, however, that at the time when Jasieński was writing his story, few realised the true danger of Nazism. In 1936, although Hitler had been in power for nearly four years, his ideology of National Socialism appeared to be simply another political myth that thrived on a pledge to deliver the German people from economic destitution. On such premises German National Socialism embarked upon the barbarous policy of 'ethnic cleansing', hitherto unexampled in human history. To give credibility to this policy, the obscure science of eugenics was lifted to supreme prominence.⁶⁴ Whatever value this 'science' might have had, its initial

⁶⁴ Eugenics has generally been associated with the predetermined, selective breeding of animals. A modern definition of eugenics classifies it as 'the science which studies the inheritable factors that determine the physical and mental qualities of human beings, with the aim of improving the

objectives were flagrantly distorted by the Nazis, and it was used to provide the excuse for genocide. Jasieński mercilessly ridicules the idea that a person's worth can be quantified according to the shape of the nose. In *The Nose* he ridicules the 'science' which supports this ideology and those 'scientists' who, under the pretext of objective study, promote racial hatred.

The Nose seems to be written from the point of view of a scholar who, although he does not directly participate in the reported events, aspires to be an objective and well-informed figure. The story is written in a style parodying a scholarly report based on empirical evidence. The most striking characteristic of the narrative strategy is that the narrator is not able to differentiate between real events and those that belong entirely to the sphere of inexplicable phenomena, for both are reported with the same indifference and restraint. Nor is the narrator able to take note of the tragic implications of the events he describes. For him it is merely a story and he makes it his duty to report all he knows about it. In the end the disjunction between the ludicrous or tragic event and its unemotional and 'objective' application creates an immensely ironic effect and the reader is forced to assess the plausibility as well as the ethical norms of the story on his own. The fact that Kallenbruck falls victim to his own philosophy also adds a profoundly ironic twist to the narrative and exposes the kind of humour which is typical of the author of the grotesque.

The universe of this story initially appears to be our own familiar world. The action takes place in Berlin, renowned as the European centre of learning, industry and technology; direct references are made to authentic figures (the Führer) and events (the München Resolution of 9 November 1923; the Congress of National Socialist Medical Doctors in Nürnberg, 1933). A number of German journals and newspapers such as *Der Völkische Beobachter* are mentioned. The authenticity of the data given in the text is supported by footnotes and a bibliography of sources. To add even further credibility to the story, the chief character is identified by his nationality, name, profession and other biographical

quality of life for future generations'. It concerns primarily the detection and the elimination of genetic diseases. The study originates with the work *Human Faculty* (1883) by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911). *Macmillan Concise Encyclopaedia*, 3rd edition, London, 1993:254.

details. At the same time, the action is based on a series of bizarre occurrences, the chief of which is the pivotal event of the story – Professor Kallenbruck's nose suddenly changing its shape and becoming the sole determinant of his worth as a human being. The real and the fantastic events conflate into a single conspicuously grotesque universe. However, once the grotesque world has been established as the norm, the events that follow take on their own logical inevitability within the context of that world. Thus the sudden change in Professor Kallenbruck's nose triggers a sequence of further extraordinary events. The first of them is a visit from Von der Pfordten, a very important Nazi ideologist and politician and Kallenbruck's friend 'sent by Providence'. As Kallenbruck is soon to find out, he comes not to help but to make sure that Kallenbruck not only acknowledges his inferiority after the shape of his nose has changed but that he fully understands the implications of this fact in terms of his own philosophy: 'Do you remember your own noble words, that it is imperative to free the German people of unworthy individuals!' (1936[37]). Von der Pfordten might be a ghost, for Kallenbruck remembers that he once read his obituary, but the narrator refuses to solve this mystery. When confronted by Kallenbruck about the fact of his death, Von der Pfordten 'dodges the question', replying that 'National Socialists never die' (1936[37]), thus implying that he might exist only as the eternal embodiment of the idea of National Socialism.

The ghostly appearance of Von der Pfordten leads to another fantastic event, a visit to the genealogical garden, where upon his insistence Kallenbruck goes to clarify his genealogy. In the grotesque any figurative expression can be taken literally, even a family tree, a diagram representing the line of descent as is the case in this story. Thus, when Von der Pfordten advises Kallenbruck to check his family tree to ascertain whether he ever had Jewish ancestors, he means a real tree that grows in what used to be Berlin's *Tiergarten* but which has now become the special genealogical garden where 'every month all the information is promptly updated on the grounds of newly discovered documentation'. The garden itself looks 'normal', although its aura of strangeness is attributed by the narrator to poor lighting:

Судя по расположению, это был Тиргартен, хотя он походил скорее на ботанический сад. На это указывали растущие в нем деревья самых причудливых и разнообразных форм. Там были деревья, громадные, как баобабы; были тонкие и высокие, как кипарисы; были и такие – ветвистые снизу и оголенные сверху, что, казалось, растут они вверх ногами; и были – наоборот – ощупанные снизу и кудластые наверху, как хамеропсы; были скрюченные в одну сторону, как гигантские кусты саксаула; и были шарообразные, словно подстриженные искусственной рукой садовника. Все деревья увешаны были сверху донизу нето шишками, нето фруктами, – в точности разглядеть не позволяло слабое освещение. (1936[37])

Judging by the area, it had to be the *Tiergarten*, the zoo, although it looked rather like a botanical garden considering the quaint and diverse outlines of the trees which grew there. Some of the trees were as big as baobabs; there were also other trees, slender and tall like cypresses; others – branched at the bottom but completely naked at the top – as if they grew upside down; there also happened to be trees plucked off at the bottom and spreading at the top like a palm tree,⁶⁵ some were bent towards one side like gigantic bushes of haloxylon; some were rounded out as if trimmed by the well-trained gardener's hand. All these trees were covered from top to bottom with something resembling neither cones nor fruits – poor lighting did not permit any of this to be seen clearly enough.

The grotesque nature of this image is only fully realised when this innocent-looking landscape is identified for what it is – a place where one's fate is irreversibly determined, for as Von der Pfordten assures Professor Kallenbruck, 'in a genealogical tree mistakes are unthinkable' (1936[37]). When Kallenbruck sees his own family tree he immediately realises that his life has ended, for according to the laws of the universe established by the story, and according to Kallenbruck's own philosophy, his worth is brought to nil when he learns that he has Jewish ancestors. The matter-of-fact narration takes no note of Kallenbruck's despair; on the contrary, the narrator seems to be engrossed in the aesthetic details of the image:

Это походило на настоящую рождественную елку. То, что бедный профессор принял в темноте за шишки, оказалось при свете человеческими фигурками из пластмассы, одетыми с кропотливой точностью по моде своей эпохи. На сучках и ветках слева восседали, как канарейки, маленькие бургеры в желтых жилетах и клетчатые матроны в высоких чепцах, удивительно похожи на удодов. На верхней ощипанной ветке, одиноко, как сыч, сидел неисправный холостяк, дед Грегор, худенкий с большущей головой и пышными седыми бакенбардами. Сухая метка Гертруда, в неизменной черной юбке, с хвостом как у трясогрузки, кидала

⁶⁵ In the original хамеропсы – *Chamaerops humilis*, type of a 'Fan Palm'.

со своего сучка возмущенные взгляды на зябко нахолившегося супруга, дядю Пауля, словно, и на этот раз он, а не кто иной, поставил ее в такое неудобное положение... Зато по правую сторону – о боже! – по правую сторону, подвешенные к веткам за шею (видимо в порядке запоздалого наказания за злостную порчу германской расы), висели целыми гирляндами грустные маленькие евреи в ермолках и лапсердаках, один даже – профессору это запомнилось особенно четко – в настоящей шапке раввина с меховой опушкой. (1936[37])

The tree looked like a genuine Christmas tree. Those things that the poor professor had taken for cones in the darkness were revealed in the full light to be small statuettes in human form, made of synthetic material and dressed in minute detail according to the style of every given epoch. On the branches and knots on the left-hand side, small burghers in yellow waistcoats were sitting like canaries. Next to them were chequered matrons in their high coifs, looking like a flight of hoopoes. Higher up, on the plucked branch, lonely as a vulture, was sitting incorrigible Uncle Gregor, thin with a large head and splendid grey whiskers. Skinny Aunt Gertrude, in the invariable black skirt which gave her the appearance of a wagtail, indignantly looked at her curly-headed husband, Uncle Paul, as if this unpleasant situation was yet again no one else's fault but his ... On the right hand side – oh, God! – the right hand side was covered with garlands of small sad Jews in *yarmulkes* and *capotes*, hanging by the neck (probably a delayed penalty for maliciously spoiling the purity of the German race). One of them – the professor remembered it with particular clarity – even wore the authentic *kolpak* of a rabbi, with its fur border.

The grotesque extends far beyond the fact that such an improbable event as the existence of gardens of family trees is reported as an empirically verifiable fact of life. We may note the undisputable logic in this description of something which to us, the readers, is an entirely abstract concept. We may also note that the non-Jewish side of Kallenbruck's ancestry resembles humans in 'minute detail'; the irony is that according to the narrator's logic this makes each of them look like a bird. Heartfelt, spontaneous laughter which this inconsistent logic raises dies much sooner than halfway however when the reader realises that the statuettes, especially on the Jewish side of Kallenbruck's ancestry, in their shape and dress code have total power to predetermine the fate of individuals. To make the irony more portentous, the basic structural feature in the description of 'echt Deutsch' – the simile – is replaced with a direct reference to 'small Jews' hanging in garlands 'by the neck', when the narrator begins to describe the Jewish line of Kallenbruck's ancestry. The seemingly mocking comment of the narrator that the hanging is the 'penalty for spoiling the purity of the German race' brings the focus back to the extremely serious issues which the story debates. The references to authentic publications clearly indicate to the reader that the grotesquely absurd events are not confined to the work of fiction but reign in real

life. The story clearly invites the reader to reconsider the fantastic nature of certain events, to see, beneath their seemingly inexplicable surface, the abominable truth about the real life lived in societies under totalitarian dictatorships, irrespective of whether the dictatorship is based on race, social class, or on the rule of the majority or the minority of the population.

That Jasieński employs improbable motives to expose the unfathomable absurdity of real life is evident in the scene when Kallenbruck meets 'Twelve Wise Men of Zion'. To the reader the scene looks like a fragment from a ludicrous fairy tale. In order to achieve maximum dramatic effect, Jasieński vivifies the vile caricature of Jews proliferated both verbally and visually not only in speeches by Hitler and Goebbels, but in Nazi newspapers like *Der Stürmer* and *Der Völkische Beobachter*. Like the motif of the genealogical garden, that of the 'Wise Men of Zion' also gains its narrative and satiric force from the grotesque literary device of metaphor treated literally, generating a similar emotional response, that is mixture of horror, disbelief and amusement, to that in case of the scene in the genealogical garden. Jasieński's imagination dwells on the most absurd elements of visual and verbal Nazi propaganda. Thus the 'Wise Men of Zion' are pictured as marionettes that, although retaining some human appearance, posses no trace of emotional life or psychological individuality. The details of their behaviour and customs, their ominous might, and their gremlin-like appearance – 'Hair grey as wormwood sprouted from his ears and nostrils and bushy white brows fell over his eyelids, creating an impression of a second pair of moustaches which had grown over his eyes by mistake' (1936[38]) – are all devices which parody the rumours spread by the Fascists with the intention of inciting race hatred against Jews among the German population at large.

The fact that all the events described thus far in the story actually take place in Kallenbruck's dream, as the narration subsequently makes clear, makes no difference to the story's overall grotesque character. On the contrary, it intensifies it further, for the events which have their origin in a dream quite clearly continue to affect the protagonist's

life in reality.⁶⁶ Thus when, horrified by his dream, Kallenbruck approaches members of his family in order to find out how they would react if they knew he was a Jew, their replies conform to those predicted in his dream. The revenge Kallenbruck devises with the ‘Jewish Elders’ in his dream, namely his plan to bribe the archivists to introduce Jewish ancestors into the genealogies of ‘pure blooded Germans’ is also subsequently confirmed in the narrator’s summary as a fact of reality. Such an explicitly grotesque narrative strategy renders the distinction between real and unreal irrelevant, leading to the conclusion that both realms – fantastic and real – are based on the same absurd premises.

The fact that the narrator is unwilling to discriminate between the real and the fantastic also blurs the distinction between the ludicrous and the tragic. The seemingly humorous and bizarre events are combined with reports of horrific and humiliating abuse of Jews. The narrator refuses to contest the logic adopted by the Nazis that Jews are *Untermenschen*. He casually reports on Professor Kallenbruck’s ludicrous research aimed at quantifying the worth of a human being by the size of his ‘cartilaginous triangular gristle’,⁶⁷ noting that it is based on the ‘extraordinary and abundant material [gathered] during his two-month tour of the concentration camps’ (1936[36]). The full horrifying implication of this ‘abundant material’ is revealed only at the end of the story when the narrator reports a rumour that Kallenbruck might have ‘lost his mind after returning from a research visit to Nazi Germany’s twenty-three concentration camps’ (1936[39]). Kallenbruck’s bizarre and ridiculous journey to the genealogical garden which he undertakes in the company of Von der Pfordten is reported along with the account of a Jew being beaten up by a few members of a Nazi youth movement who performed their task ‘methodically, without putting too much heart into their activity’ (1936[37]). Equally

⁶⁶ Such a device greatly contributes to the atmosphere of ambiguity. There is an analogous situation in one of early stories by Gogol, *The May Night* in which the young hero Levko receives in his dream an important note which he quickly ‘grabbed and woke up’ (*схватил он записку и проснулся*). He still holds the note in his hand when he wakes up. After waking from his dream Kallenbruck behaves in a way similar to Levko, except that Levko was amazed while Kallenbruck is disgusted (see Gogol 1936:38).

⁶⁷ Tissue inside the nose which determines the shape of the nose.

observant in respect of various visual details of the scene but entirely oblivious to its emotional significance is the narrator's description of Kallenbruck's own misery:

Проф. Калленбрук отшатнулся, задев одного из прохожих. Тот оттолкнул его с такой силой, что бедный профессор растянулся во весь рост под одобрительный хохот зевак. От удара о тротуар у профессора выскоцила искусственная челюсть. Он пополз было за ней на четвереньках, но кто-то предусмотрительно поджигнул ее ногой на середину улицы, под проезжающий автомобиль. (1936[38])

Prof. Kallenbruck abruptly stepped back, bumping a chance passer-by who pushed him back so hard that the poor professor fell head over heels, making a laughing stock of himself. In consequence of this fall, the professor's false teeth fell out and he was crawling to get them when someone anticipated his move and kicked them into the middle of the road, straight under the wheels of the oncoming cars.

The scene illustrates that form of the grotesque which is rooted exclusively in reality and is even more disturbing, for it calls our attention to the fact that a person's misery arouses laughter instead of compassion.⁶⁸ The grotesqueness is rooted not only in the ludicrous fact of a human body 'falling apart' but rather in the disjunction between the event and the reaction it evokes in its witnesses. One cannot possibly imagine a more humiliating incident happening to a person in public than this, and yet according to the narrator's account, everyone bursts into laughter. In the case of Kallenbruck, however, the reader realises, that the reaction of the public is aroused not by the ludicrous nature of the event but by the fact that it happened to a Jew. Thus instead of trying to help him, as would normally be the case, the passer-by kicks the denture even further away. The reader's empathy for poor Kallenbruck and his intention to protest against such cruel treatment is halfhearted, however, for it is quite obvious that in a strange twist of fate this is exactly the treatment Kallenbruck deserves for championing the racist philosophy which promotes such treatment.

⁶⁸ The intrinsically unresolved tension between the tragic event and the indifferent tone of narration, as well as the narrator's insistence on insignificant detail, is typical of black humour.

That Kallenbruck is a grotesque figure is easier to sense than to define, for unlike the Mannequin-Leader for instance, who was both a man and a dummy, Kallenbruck is wholly human. There is no violation of categories in his presentation: even his nose which changes its shape is in the end a human nose; it only changes Kallenbruck's racial affiliation from an Aryan to a Jew.⁶⁹ Kallenbruck's grotesqueness lies somewhere else, namely in the fact that his standing as the story's protagonist is ambivalent. He is both a villain and a victim, evoking in the reader an intensely disquieting ambivalent response – contempt and pity. As it is, he suffers the very misery which he has created for others. His arrogance, his spiritual vacuity, and his fanatical submission to the abhorrent ideology of racial superiority return to him like a boomerang and eventually destroy him.

Although the story's primary target is to ridicule Fascist ideology, Jasieński also directs his attack at all those who gave it their direct support. Not for the first time does Jasieński question science and its contribution to the progress of humanity. As a Futurist he had already sensed that the rapid development of technology had the potential to destroy the very foundations of what are perceived as essentially human characteristics, as seen in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*. Jasieński was convinced that science had the power both to assist humankind and to kill, that it could both cure and poison; that is why the apocalyptic act of destruction in *I Burn Paris* originates in a scientific laboratory where the plague microbes are kept for scientific research. In *The Chief Culprit* science is exposed as some abstract monster engaged in an incongruous race with itself, on the one hand directing its efforts at developing the perfect killing machine and on the other developing the ideal defence system. The same dichotomy applies to philosophies and ideologies. Jasieński attacked the Church as an institution supporting oppression while he clearly sensed that the philosophy behind the Church carried a message of hope and encouraged compassion and 'love of thy neighbour'. His perception of the ambivalence in Christian philosophy –

⁶⁹ There might be a specific significance to his name which seems to be a combination of German *Kallen* meaning 'prattle' that is, talking nonsense, and *Bruch* (as the professor finds out in the genealogical garden his name used to be Kallenbruch), having various meanings one of which is 'get ruined', 'be broken up', 'come to an end'. The name Kallenbruck can mean that the professor is ruined because of his absurd 'prattle', that is his own preaching.

or rather the possibility of manipulating it – is apparent in his attitude to Christ in his poetry, where Christ is simultaneously a symbol of oppression and a symbol of suffering. The danger of ideology being manipulated by people and the impossibility of seeing what is hidden behind the allure of slogans and of penetrating the façade of political jargon became the main theme in *The Ball of the Mannequins*. In the last of his short stories, *The Nose*, Jasieński exposes the absurdity of an ideology which employs pseudo-anthropological data in order to prove that the Aryan 'race' is superior to the Semitic 'race'.

The Nose proves that Jasieński was seriously concerned about the possibility of manipulating intelligent people into the service of science detached from any humanitarian cause, probably being himself fully aware that by extension the same danger menaces both art and artists. Kallenbruck is a 'real person' with an address and a clearly defined identity, unlike most of other Jasieński's heroes who are either anonymous or are living in a social void. Kallenbruck is a doctor and a professor of eugenics, an eminent specialist in comparative 'raciology' and racial psychology, member of many scientific societies and scholarly institutions, an author of numerous books. The narrator interminably refers to him as 'professor'. But since all these 'learned societies' are in fact bogus and based on wholly ludicrous principles, as the 'science' of eugenics itself, Kallenbruck's scholarly prominence is worth nothing. He is as much a fraud as the institutions with which he associates himself. The detailed information provided by the narrator about him serves only the purpose of enforcing the irony of his position, to point out that his intellectual potential is entirely misdirected; it does not contribute to the progress of humanity but promotes abuse. Kallenbruck is a monster indifferent to the suffering he causes, excusing himself with 'scientific' and ideological reasoning. He does not consider people as human beings but treats them as objects that should be measured and classified in order to be either retained or discarded. The pseudo-scientific character of the narrative is meant to parody the pseudo-scientific discourse used by Nazi propaganda, the discourse based on utterly absurd premises. Significantly, Kallenbruck's transmutation on both occasions occurs when the professor intends to prove 'scientifically' that the worth of a human being is evaluated exclusively by the shape of his or her nose. Mocking the absurdity of

Kallenbruck's approach, Jasieński displays the kind of humour which is typical of an author of the grotesque, but the reader's laughter is only halfhearted, especially today when we know how closely Jasieński's grotesque was enacted in real life. The purpose of the spark of 'perverse glee' which we see in these scenes is to render laughable the beliefs and attitudes which Kallenbruck represents as a scholar. Thus the first change of his nose takes place when, determined 'to follow his scholarly principle of using only precise scientific language, the professor took from his drawer special compasses, used for similar purposes by anthropometrists, and approached the mirror with the intention of taking necessary measurements' (1936[36]), and the second change takes place under similar circumstances, during his lecture when 'he started his description of the Semitic nose, with its characteristic hump together with the overgrowth of the cartilaginous gristle' (1936[39]). In both cases, we may add, the narrator reports these events as normal and plausible, although he avoids going into the details of this bizarre transformation. But the grotesque transmogrification of Kallenbruck from a successful scientist into a casualty of his own 'science' exemplifies the perfect marriage of the grotesque with satire, considerably enhancing the intensity of the story.

Following this line of reasoning, we can see that as a satirist Jasieński ridicules in *The Nose* the Nazi theory that the merit of a person depends entirely on descent. He shows that this is not only an official bureaucratic point of view but is also readily adopted for interpersonal and even family relations. Seeing Kallenbruck with his new nose, his friend exclaims 'I do not have, and cannot possibly have acquaintances among the people of your race' (1936[39]). Kallenbruck's family takes exactly the same position towards him. His wife tells him that she would immediately leave him because 'why should I feel sorry for a Jew'. The Professor's children are also ready to throw him 'on the rubbish heap' (1936[39]). Kallenbruck is not loved for being an honest citizen, good friend or a good husband and father but for being a 'pure' German.

That Jasieński was aware that this utterly ludicrous phenomenon is not limited to Germany but was also a fact of life in the Soviet Union, can be seen only through allusions in his other 'Soviet' works. For instance, in *Bravery* he notes a similar evaluation of people: the

‘class purity’ (Panteleyev, the son of a *kulak*, is unmasked as an enemy) and the ‘correctness’ of views (his wife Olga leaves Onufrev because he did not live up to the name of being a Communist) are exposed as major motivations of the actions of the protagonists. Friendships, family relations, the value of human beings all depend on only one criterion – whether the person is seen as a ‘pure’ Communist. This theme gets particular exposure in *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent* in which a devoted young Communist, Garanin, is expelled from the Party for being a ‘Trotskyist’. As is the case with Kallenbruck, who is not recognised by his friends when he has a Jewish nose, the moment Garanin’s friends learn that he has been labelled ‘enemy’, they leave his apartment one by one even before he has a chance to explain himself, believing that they are ‘in no position to doubt the decision of the Party Bureau’ and until the matter is resolved, they cannot ‘drink in his home’ (1956[5]:78). In the same way as Von der Pfordten appeals to ‘the last drop of German blood’ in Kallenbruck: ‘I am trying to tell you that in the name of this one drop of German blood that is in your veins, you have to take this decision without any further hesitation’ (1936[37]); Garanin’s wife is expected to behave ‘as becomes a *Komsomol* member’. As one of the chief characters in the novel puts it: ‘You are not only a wife but also a member of *Komsomol*. Actually, you are a member of *Komsomol* in the first place, and only later are you a wife. Isn’t this true?’ (1956[5]:85). After a conversation with an older ‘comrade’ Garanina shoots her husband dead because she is convinced that he betrayed the Party. The same logic is pursued in *The Nose* where Kallenbruck’s wife is a German woman in the first place, and only then she is his wife (1936[37]). Both examples are good illustrations of the extent to which ideology can penetrate and poison normal human relationships.

It is conceivable to see Kallenbruck as a result of Jasieński’s ‘soul searching’ and to argue that the author identifies with his hero in a similar degree to which he identified with Mannequin-Leader whose final monologue looks like a desperate attempt at confession but is at the same time a clownish self-mockery. Seeing what direction Stalinism was taking, Jasieński might have seen himself both as a ‘villain’, who supported a monster-ideology, and as a victim of his own fanaticism.. The case is strongly supported by looking at Jasieński’s unfinished novel *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent*. Although this novel is not

included in this study – it is not grotesque in the same sense as the works examined here – thematically it reads as an extension of Jasieński's short stories, especially *The Nose*. The action takes place in the Soviet Union. The values of the Soviet society, the stifled discourse of propaganda which dominates everyday conversations, the secrecy and ambivalence penetrating every aspect of life are not the qualities which are limited to fiction, but are all characteristics of life in the Soviet Union in the nineteen-thirties and which Jasieński reproduces in this novel according to the principles of realism. The reader may draw parallels: while in Germany the criteria for valuing humans were established along racial lines and are ridiculed by Jasieński through the use of conspicuous grotesque in *The Nose*, in the Soviet Union the criteria were established along ideological lines and are presented in the novel as acknowledged and justifiable facts.⁷⁰ As Sinyavsky notes, the matter of 'family tree' was very important in the Soviet Union: 'social origin became the critical factor in determining people's lives and fates. A proletarian was by definition a good person, worthy of trust and attention' (1990:142). 'Class purity' was one of the most important 'measures' of one's value and many Soviet leaders made a point of emphasising their proletarian genealogy which was to be taken as a guarantee of their devotion to the cause. Sometimes, as Sinyavsky notes further, 'social origin alone was enough to invite a person's arrest or death', it became the phenomenon of reality and assumed the form of the 'highly rigid and restrictive nature' of a questionnaire which 'sifted people, dividing them into categories depending on their past affiliation to one class or another. The questionnaire decided whom to discard or destroy, whom to allow to linger on, whom to invite to join in the life of the new society, whom to promote in his work or studies' (ibid.:143-144). Whether Jasieński approved of one absurdity while he was fiercely deriding the other is a question yet to be answered, for even his realistic novel is written in a manner, which like his grotesque works, prevents the reader to deciphering his position unequivocally

⁷⁰ Even though the novel is realistic, the question remains whether Jasieński accepted the logic of its universe. In all his previous grotesque works he confronted the reader with a conspicuously grotesque universe. The onus was on the reader to evaluate it. The fact that the universe of *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent* is 'realistic' does not mean that its logic must be acceptable to the reader or that it conforms with a common sense understanding of life.

Consequently there is a legitimate reason to look at *The Nose* as a general comment on the epoch which seemed completely to lose any sense of human values in a world dominated by deterministic sciences which insisted on being able to quantify everything or explain it according to laws of cause and effect and to justify any wrong-doing by ideological rhetoric. That is why from the very beginning of his writing Jasieński tried to establish how in such a world one could determine the value of human life or the worth of an individual so that one could have tangible parameters. Jasieński who, as a Futurist and later a Communist, acknowledged only the physical world and rejected the para-sensual existence not to mention the spiritual essence of human beings, as a poet and later as a prose writer was constantly exposed to the shortcomings of his own conception of the world. That is why not only in his poetry but also in all his satiric grotesques we sense inexplicable tension, derision and even self-mockery. Deriding the simplistic materialistic perception of man, Jasieński derides also his own naïveté and inability to differentiate between the appearances and what is beneath them.

CONCLUSIONS

[...] serious attention to the grotesque might unlock many secrets.

(Harpham: *On the Grotesque*)

Bruno Jasieński's writing is characterised by an abundant display of daring artistic devices that defamiliarise the universe to the point of becoming incongruous and ambivalent. The conclusion that the grotesque is a dominant characteristic of Bruno Jasieński's art is thus based on the recognition that it does not only affect the formal properties of his works but also strongly impacts on his portrayal of people and their surroundings, as well as the customs and laws by which they live. Although Jasieński never formulated his understanding of the grotesque, his writing proves that the grotesque mode was consonant with his view of literature and its social rôle, and that he employed it as his favourite means of expression throughout his literary career. Literature was for Jasieński a 'sophisticated game' with its own intricate rules, as he noted in one of his early attempts at prose, in the *Exposé* to *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*. Jasieński believed by then that 'the reader that has no understanding of the rules of this game or simply being arrogant, spoils it by taking verbatim everything that has been written' (1972:218). He expressed similar views in Paris after the disappointing response to his novel *I Burn Paris*, complaining bitterly to a friend that 'people understand nothing' of his writing, because they read everything literally thus denying the writer his legitimate right to allegory and metaphor (Zechenter 1965:7).

Jasieński entered upon the literary stage at the time when the world was approaching a critical point. Unprecedented advances in technology, geographical and social changes in the Post World War I Europe and the success of the October Revolution in Russia were among the most important historical events that imprinted on the consciousness of the contemporary generation, and that in Jasieński's view had to be acknowledged by all artists. In one of his poems he noted that 'the world is like an abscess swelling and breaking on us' (*Morse*, 1972:56). He put it even more forcefully in one of his Futuristic

manifestos: 'All logical possibilities are exhausted. [...] Life, in its logicality, has become ghastly and illogical'. The overpowering feeling that the world had come to the point when 'nothing is self evident and that apart from this very logic there still is the whole sea of illogicalities, each of which can create its own separate logic' (both 1972:204) made him reach for the grotesque which on the one hand was consonant with the avant-garde requirement of provocative tonality and bold artistic devices, and on the other hand reflected the inexplicable complexity of life.

After closing the volume of Jasieński's poetry, the reader is left with a strange feeling of sharing an experience which is both beautiful and disturbing. The most immediate effect of shock is conveyed to the reader through the imagery and language in which it is presented. The grotesque owes much of its intensity to the lexical component of Jasieński's poems, and it is achieved mostly through the bold use of neologisms, borrowings from scientific terminology, and almost indiscriminate use of words from the non-literary word-stock, that is vulgarisms, obscenities, the erotic lexicon, and physiological terminology. To secure maximum effect, Jasieński also uses words that normally would never be used together in the same context. The reason of such strategy is to enhance the general incongruity of the presented universe. Such is the case with the iconoclastic reference to Christ as 'small and hideous'¹ (*I Am Tired of Language*) or with the blasphemous phrase evoking the image of the 'non-party god, blowing blood from his nose' (*A Song about Hunger*).

In the grotesque world emerging from Jasieński's poems language does not distinguish incompatible categories or recognise norms of an 'appropriate' association of concepts. As a result we are able to visualise transcategorical hybrid images such as 'houses vomiting people to the streets', 'sun pimpling itself on to the sky' or 'moon-gonococcus infecting the night'. These extraordinary lexical exploits are extended to the non-standard word stock. Experimenting with language, Jasieński uses words that are commonly

¹ In the Polish-English dictionary: *pokraczny* equivalent to: hideous; grotesque; mis-shapen (Stanisławski 1981).

considered objectionable, for instance *kurwa* (whore) in the poem *Marsz* ('March', 1972:22), or *burdel* (brothel) in *The City*. Even in colloquial speech the usage of such words is restricted, but in poetry they are so unconventional and unexpected that their presence can only be accounted for by recognising the use of the stylistic grotesque. The translator's task in such cases is made especially difficult, since standard dictionaries usually let us down, suggesting stylistically indifferent versions of what in the original language evokes offensive associations.

The use of the non-standard word stock is extended to imagery that in common usage would be considered offensive. Such imagery attacks the reading public's sensitivity, it evokes disgust with the world as it is. Apart from that, the function of this imagery is to stress the incarnate essence of the world. This is particularly effective in Jasieński's portrayal of the repugnant physicality of the human body and the obscene aspects of life. The crowd, in itself subjected to an ambivalent portrayal, is qualified by drastic epithets such as *thumie, żarty przez syphilis! Zaropiałe, cuchnące, owrzodzone bydło* 'oh, crowd, devoured by syphilis, suppurating, noisome cattle' (*I Am Tired of Language*). In Jasieński's earlier poems, under the bed *nieodzownie zwykły sprzęt złowonny* 'an indispensable foul-smelling utensil' (*The City*) is noted, along with items of underwear: *majtki*, 'panties', (*Vomiting Statues*), and *stanik*, 'brassière', stained with the blood of a hemophiliac in his poem *Śnieg*, ('Snow'). In the prose works such imagery develops into extensive obscene spectacles of life. Such is the case with the morbid descriptions of the modern metropolis, or its night life portrayed as dominated by pornographic episodes (in *I Burn Paris*). The grotesque is achieved either by the matter-of-fact description of excess or by a blend of the trivial with the holy. Disgusting and ludicrous elements are occasionally infused with tragic overtones, or an essentially tragic event is presented as a jolly farce, as seen in the scene of Professor Kallenbruck wiping the nose which features on his face but which he refuses to accept as his own (*The Nose*).

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of Jasieński's works is their ambivalent universe that appears scrupulously to re-create reality but that is invested with improbable and ominous events and populated with bizarre creatures that resemble humans only by

the shape of their bodies but lack any essential human characteristic. From his opening poem, *Vomiting Statues*, to the last story discussed in this study, *The Nose*, Jasieński invariably renders the world in such terms that the reader can never be sure whether the poet dwells in the familiar realm of everyday life or in the realm of dreams, hallucination, perverse imagination or even insanity. This equivocal universe owes its grotesque intensity largely to its visual quality. Thus, in this supra-ordinary world of the grotesque it is not only the emphasis on the material spheres of life that counts, but also the technique that permits abstract concepts to assume physical qualities such as colour, form and the ability to act, making them 'visible' personified beings: nonsenses dance in the streets and Lady Art strips herself naked on a nightclub table (*Vomiting Statues*), whereas boredom is large, slippery and of creamy colour (*Ipecacuanha*), sadness is green, dawn crawls (*Corpses with Caviar*), sorrows sit in a row, silence walks the streets (*The City*), song is harvested, eternity burns in people (*The Lay of Jakub Szela*).

However, the most effective defamiliarisation of the real world takes place through the imagery that uses the human body as its referent. From the very beginning Jasieński's poems are inhabited with creatures that are odd enough to be considered grotesque: next to the ladies 'made of velvet and silk' and with 'white, suède eyelids' we see gentlemen with an odd 'froggy stare' (*Ipecacuanha*). Apart from that, the population of Jasieński's works consists either of fragments of people – legs (*The Legs of Isolda Morgan*), torsos in a window frame (*The City, I Burn Paris*) or transcategorical hybrids which have appropriated certain functions of the human body or its shape ('vomiting statues', 'wooden janitor', 'pig snout in swallow-tail coat', dancing mannequins, statuettes on the family tree, 'Jewish Elders', and so forth). Occasionally, one part of the human body assumes an independent existence and begins to function according to the laws of metonymy, as is the case with Isolda's legs, or with Professor Kallenbruck's nose. Although in the latter case the nose is not detached from a body, it not only has a mind of its own but more importantly, it absolutely overshadows whatever other qualities the professor might have as a human being. The full potential of the human body for the grotesque portrayal Jasieński explored in his 'grotesque comedy' *The Ball of the Mannequins* in which dummies and people look alike and behave in a similar manner,

forcing upon us the conclusion that it is very difficult in the modern world to differentiate people from human-like dummies. We see that the beauty of mannequins is shallow and that their values are false. Their perfect bodies signify a superficial beauty that lacks any deeper significance, in this case, it lacks true human substance. Furthermore, the humans in the play, giving priority to appearance and material status over love and compassion, also live by the botched values of the tailors' dummies. By extending the qualities of dummies to the human world the play makes a powerful ironic statement of universal significance: the modern world is preoccupied with the material essence of being – appearance, material commodities and status. By exposing the shallowness of modern society, the play forces us to look for the more profound meaning to life.

The ambivalent and incongruous universe of Jasieński's works is as a rule subordinated to the intrinsic logic of a literary work cultivating its own value system. While the logic promoted by Berg in *The Legs of Isolda Morgan*, for instance, refuses to differentiate between humans and machines, in *The Lay of Jakub Szela* there is no distinction between the wedding dance and the bloody mutiny; in *I Burn Paris*, between insignificant personal misfortune and a major crime against humanity; in *The Nose*, between the appearance and the true measure of a human being. In all cases the reasoning of the narrators or respective protagonists is ostensibly hostile to people in general. The fate of the world is subordinated to the delusions of the protagonists or to the peremptory ideologies that treat people either as uniform mass or as objects devoid of feelings, desires, and individuality. According to these ideologies, anyone who does not conform can be 'easily killed' as one of the characters suggests. Such reasoning is supported by the grotesque strategy of rendering human beings as automata that can be freely assembled or dismantled and eventually discarded. According to the simplistic logic of the tailors' dummies in *The Ball of the Mannequins*, people are like them – disposable objects destined merely to exhibit garments, they are made in factories and modified to suit the current vogue. That 'vogue' can mean anything is seen in *The Nose*, in which the father is told by his child that he would be sent 'to a rubbish heap' if he were a Jew, meaning that the 'fashion' is only for Germans. In *Bravery* the value of a person depends on the position one occupies in Communist society, which means that the 'fashion' is for Communists while all others are

second-class citizens. Apart from the occasional humorous effect aiming at exposing human vanity, this strategy of denying human characters their human essence definitely carries a more meaningful message. It openly points out the perils of a philosophy that fosters the belief that humans are objects, thus creating the dangerous precedent of justifying the elimination of those considered superfluous for whatever ludicrous and arbitrary reason. Thus, motivated by arrogance and a misunderstanding of the human world, tailors' dummies assume ascendancy over humans and behead Ribandell. Driven by hatred and obsessive jealousy, Pierre decides to infect thousands of innocent Parisians with deadly disease, because he considers them to be mere components of a badly structured mechanism that has to be completely destroyed before it can be built anew. Devoted to the false logic of eugenics, the pseudo-scientist Professor Kallenbruck promotes the idea of ethnic cleansing and gives his talent and energy to justifying genocide.

The quality of reasoning applied in Jasieński's works contradicts the conventional coherence and logical order of life as we know and accept it, but the author refuses to identify with us. His voice remains indistinguishable amidst all other voices heard in his works. It merges with the voice of an implied author, with the voices of narrators or the numerous characters in his works. Such a strategy is entirely in line with the nonplussing nature of the grotesque which forcefully places the burden of distinguishing between right and wrong or true and false on the reader. The question of the emotional involvement of the author is similar. His extension, the lyrical 'I' in poetry, and various narrative voices in the prose works withhold their emotional attitude towards the universe portrayed. On the contrary – the more morbid and gruesome are the described events, the more indifferent and detached is the presentation of the maimed world. Even personal tragedy, the death of the poet's beloved sister Renia, is rendered in the context of *commedia dell'arte* (*Deszcz*, 'Rain'), wedding (*Pogrzeb Reni*, 'Renia's Funeral') or hallucination (*The Song about Hunger*). In Jasieński's most controversial novel *I Burn Paris*, we see several frightful scenes of death being presented as merely interesting for their uncanny details: the legs of the dying Jeanette, for instance, are described as resembling snakes. In *The Nose*, the humiliating scene of Professor Kallenbruck losing his dentures during his

fall in the street is presented as evoking uproarious laughter in the onlookers. Just as it is impossible to establish Jasieński's viewpoint with any dose of certainty, so it is with his emotional attitude towards the tragedies and acts of cruelty he portrays in his works. Thousands of Parisians die senselessly, yet the author does not condemn Pierre nor express his empathy for the innocent victims of his insane action. Initially, this inconsistency between the content of a scene and its presentation proves a most effective grotesque manoeuvre, attributed to the Futuristic call to intensify the reader's response to a work of art by shocking with unconventional literary techniques. Concurrently it is seen, however, as part of the wider grotesque strategy of using the text not only as a means to expose the absurdity of life but also as an effective way to hide the author's own emotions and views behind the mask of the text. Thus, exploring the inconclusive question of the viewpoint in his works and the inherently ambivalent nature of their universe, we come to the realisation that attempts to categorise Jasieński, the writer of the grotesque, must fail, because we are never able to state with absolute certainty what his own view is, whether he has one or is merely searching for it.

While Jasieński's early grotesque works reveal physical decrepitude in a world in which moral standards decline along with the crumbling of walls, his later works, written in the Soviet Union during the nineteen-thirties, focus on a beautiful and noble appearance that conceals mediocrity and evil. Considering Jasieński's fascination with Communism as an ideology that promised to satisfy the longing for justice, order and harmony which he could not find in capitalist society, this shift is very important, for it might mean that it masks his disenchantment with Soviet reality. We know that officially it was permitted to use the grotesque only in satire, but Jasieński's use of this mode of expression goes far beyond satire directed at the evils of the capitalist society, as has been alleged in existing criticism (Kolesnikoff, Balcerzan, Rawiński).

Used initially only as a device through which the deceptive nature of appearance was disclosed, the grotesque continues to be the chief characteristic of Jasieński's 'Soviet' works. Being greatly sensitive to any manifestation of duplicity and ambiguity, he repeatedly denounced agreeable and pleasant appearance as misleading, seeing beneath it

the ugly, demoralised or oppressive world: in his poems, a cosy-looking house with pink curtains is a bordello, a vivacious dance is a massacre, respectable-looking old men are moral outcasts and perverts. In *The Ball of the Mannequins* this device assumes the significance of a frontal attack on the beauty of appearance, rendering it unimportant or deceiving. The beautiful female figure belongs to a mannequin and causes Ribandell, obsessed with the idea of a perfect female body, to lose his head, while the elegant crowd gathered at Arnoux's mansion embodies petty-bourgeois bigotry, greediness and a lack of higher values. Respectable party functionaries are exposed as self-centred careerists. In *The Nose*, the distinguished scholar is unmasked as a racist, while in *Bravery*, respected Communists are exposed as cowards and liars who manipulate their followers by constantly bringing up their former contributions to the cause. One should add to this that in the grotesque world the scrupulous details – cogent motifs of reality – are either misleading or irrelevant. Thus the information that Ribandell is a puppet politician representing the French Socialist Democrats is provided only for an immediate satiric gain. His grotesque *alter ego* – Mannequin-Leader – serves, however, as a brilliantly vitriolic comment on all politicians and party functionaries in the world. By analogy, although the immediate impression is that the irrational grip of militarism concerns only Poland (in *The Chief Culprit*) and totalitarian Fascist society is limited only to Germany (in *The Nose*), the grotesque character of these works makes one search for more lasting conclusions. Thus the other, non-satirical plane of these works, lays bare the universal idiosyncrasy of human nature – the wish to dominate a fellow human being at any cost, and to brutalise him in the name of an abstract idea. The motivation that it is being done in the social interest and the abstract promise of achieving common happiness are offered as a smoke-screen for more immediate objectives – this seems to be the message of Jasieński's grotesque satires. For this reason, Jasieński's late works read as the author's admission to a blunder which he committed himself when he fell into the trap of a beautiful ideology which eventually proved not up to his expectations.

By acknowledging the grotesque nature of Jasieński's later works we rebut the prevailing view of the artist as an ardent supporter of Communism, uncritical of its derelictions. Jasieński used the grotesque deliberately in a number of his later works, knowing that it

was wholly incompatible with socialist realism devised as the obligatory method of Soviet literature. The grotesque in his later works may be seen as a proof that, growing more familiar with Stalinism, he used it as a refuge for his own disillusionment with the repressive Soviet system. The support for this thesis we find even in his, unfinished realistic novel *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent*, in which he draws an implicit parallel between the Communist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The narrative moves from a panoramic survey of the world to describe the New Year celebration in a Soviet home. The text is full of ambivalent statements and ironic overtones which imply the sham unity of Soviet society and the supposed bliss of life disseminated by Soviet propaganda. Thus the selection of a friendly New Year celebration is done according to the principle 'scratch my back, I scratch yours' (*по принципу 'кто с кем дружит'* [1956(5):74]) and a fragment of a song serves as a refrain to this celebration: 'we are peace-loving people but our armoured train is ready in a depot' (*Мы мирные люди, но наш бронепоезд стоит на запасном пути...* [75]) to which the narrator adds the seemingly casual remark: 'Seemingly bourgeois foxtrot, yet still with our own content' (*Вроде буржуазный фокстрот, а все-таки с нашей начинкой*). Lack of criticism and fanatical obedience is frequently hinted at, as illustrated by the riposte of a young girl to the factory poet: 'Are you at all capable of having your own opinion about anything before you read about it in *Pravda*?' (*А разве у тебя по какому-нибудь вопросу есть свое мнение, пока не вычитаешь в Правде?* [76]). The novel obeys the laws of realism and for this reason it is not included in this study. Nevertheless, it is an interesting case, similar to that of the short story *Bravery*, in which the mind and the technique of the writer of the grotesque is very prominent. The point is that this time the grotesque seldom affects figurative devices; it simply creeps into the realistic portrayal of real life exposing its unlimited absurdity and becoming its most distinguishing phenomenon. That is why with a typical grotesque jeer Jasieński seems to admit that now he no longer needs to create in the mode of the grotesque, he can simply reproduce life realistically, according to tangible experience, yet the created universe will be the same as it was in his grotesque works – inexplicably incoherent. But this conclusion belongs to the reader alone.

Scope for further research into Jasieński's art still remains almost unlimited. With genuine respect for his extraordinary talent this study examined only selected aspects of his use of the grotesque. While the focus was maintained on the universe of his works, its logic and value system, on the portrayal of the city and the emerging concept of man, little attention has been paid to other concepts and images such as, for instance, love and sex, the female figure, or the image of the window, all of which frequently reappear in Jasieński's works, adding to their grotesque character. It has been established that the universe of all the works examined is threatening and inspires pessimism. It is governed by absurd reasoning, unacceptable from our point of view. It is populated with creatures which even if they claim to be human, have no human values and no human appeal. Jasieński's grotesque works warn us that apparent beauty and harmony should be approached with caution for they may merely disguise truly sinister agendas.

APPENDIX

BRUNO JASIEŃSKI: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bruno Jasieński¹ was born on 17 July 1901 in Klimontów, south-eastern Poland, then under Russian rule. Soon after the beginning of the First World War the family of the poet was transferred to Moscow where Dr Zysman was conscripted to serve in the Tsarist army. In Moscow Jasieński attended the Polish college where he eventually matriculated with distinction. His stay in Moscow during the years 1914-1918 was an important experience, one which could be seen as decisive for his future interests and choices: exposure to the vibrant artistic developments which tantalised Muscovites at the time might have been decisive for his artistic career. In 1918 the Jasieńskis returned to Poland, where the repercussions of the political upheaval in Russia led to dramatic political changes. After years of patriotic struggle and sacrifice, Poland officially regained its independence in November 1918. Establishing a suitable political system was a matter of urgency, but no less important was the task of sorting out social issues neglected until this time. Jasieński, who enrolled in the Department of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow to study Polish literature (Jaworski 1995: 10), found himself in the midst of this political ferment. The need to 'rebuild and restructure life radically' was singled out as the burning issue of the day. Jasieński called upon all citizens of the newly independent Polish Republic to 'unite in an organised effort to co-operate' (Jasieński 1972:198). Despite his youth, Jasieński became the leading figure of the Polish Futurist movement. As Jaworski puts it, 'the years 1921-1923 were years of stormy Futuristic activities for Jasieński – he was an organiser of and participant in a number of poetic soirées and literary lectures, many of which were considered scandalous' (1995:11). Apart

¹ His real name was Wiktor Zysman. According to the most recent source, 'on 12 August 1908 Wiktor Zysman was adopted (*usynowiony*) by Iwan Jasieński and his wife, Aniela, and from 13 August 1908 he assumed this surname along with his siblings. (Jaworski 1995:9). The reasons for the adoption and the change of name remain unknown. Regarding the name Bruno, Jaworski says that the 'writer assumed it much later, probably in 1920. This is an abridged version of Jasieński's biographical sketch, published in *Jewish Affairs* 1996(1), pp. 30-38. The present version has been updated with the information provided by Jaworski 1995, unavailable to me earlier.

from manifestos, in which the Futurists' views on art, life and occasionally on politics were put forward, Jasieński concurrently published a number of poems. Initially his poetry showed the strong influence of Russian Ego-Futurists, but soon his poetry reveals its author's interest in social issues and betrays his interest in Communism.

After marrying Klara Arem² in 1923, Jasieński settled for a short period in his wife's home town, Lvov (now in the Ukraine), where he finally succeeded in establishing contact with Communists but, by his own admission, the collaboration was limited to translating fragments from Lenin and other theoreticians of revolutionary Marxism for a Communist newspaper (in *ibid.*:144). Officially, Jasieński was never a member of the Polish Communist Party³ but his sympathies were obvious and did not go unnoticed on either side of the political divide: he was put under a 'police supervision' by the state, while Communist activists acknowledged his potential and value for the cause, especially after the publication of a collection of Futuristic poetry, *Ziemia na lewo* ('Earth to the Left', 1924), in which Jasieński was the chief contributor.

Soon after graduating from the university on 17 July 1925 (*ibid.*:15), Jasieński and his wife went to France where they ultimately spent four years.⁴ It is known from eyewitness

² All previous sources have given her name as Kara. Jaworski, however, referring to Jasieński's written testimony, says that Jasieński clearly used the name Klara. Jaworski established further that after parting with Jasieński, Klara was involved with the chief of the infamous Stalinist *Organy* (political police), Genrikh Yagoda and eventually too fell a victim of Stalin's purges. Arrested in April 1937 she was executed in January 1938. The same fate eventually met Yagoda (1995:12-13).

³ In his last written testimony Jasieński recalls this period in the following words: 'The secret police knew well that I was not a member of the Communist Party, and that my co-operation with the *Workers' Tribune* was short-lived and had a platonic character' (Jaworski 1995:144), and: 'I never was a member of the CPP' (*ibid.*:167).

⁴ In his last testimony, among the reasons for his decision to leave Poland, Jasieński mentions compulsory army service, which he was not eager to undertake, and 'some stupid lawsuit for blasphemy' resulting from one of his poetic soirées. But the true reasons were more substantial. Jasieński admits that at the time he was pressurised by the Communist Party in Poland to 'reject everything' that he considered 'literary activity'. Having great admiration for Romain Rolland, as he admits, he decided to become 'the tribune of revolutionary word' without giving up 'creative

recollections, that the Jasieńskis lived in Paris in abject poverty (Stern 1969:67). As Dziarnowska says, Jasieński was too proud to ask for financial support from his wife's family and tried to earn a living as a correspondent for Polish fashion magazines (1982:168-169). In France Jasieński published two important works, the poem *The Lay of Jakub Szela* (1926) and the novel *I Burn Paris* (1927), the publication of which by the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* brought him unexpected publicity and finally secured him membership of the French Communist Party (Jaworski 1995:15-17). Jasieński was delegated to establish a workers' theatre for Polish migrant workers in France, mainly coal-miners, which would become a platform for Communist propaganda. This led to his deportation from France in May 1929. However, the reasons for the deportation are not established for certain. One version, perpetuated by Jasieński, has it that he was deported because of the anti-establishment, 'inflammatory' character of his novel *I Burn Paris* (ibid.:163). Another version is that the French authorities acted on the request of the Polish Embassy which was dissatisfied with the growing popularity of Jasieński's work amongst Polish workers in France (Dziarnowska 1982:243).

The next stage in Jasieński's life develops in the Soviet Union, although, according to Jasieński's own testimony given on 11 January 1938, he initially hoped to settle in Germany, where his works were concurrently published by *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, but was refused a visa (Jaworski 1995:163-164). He could not return to Poland because, as he recalls himself, his Polish passport was no longer valid. In addition, Jasieński was afraid that he would be forced to complete military service (ibid.:10, 149). The only option was for Jasieński to accept the invitation which came from Dąbal to come to the Soviet Union. Smuggled out on the lower deck of a ship, Jasieński arrived in Leningrad on 21 May 1929 to a hero's welcome as one of the victims of what the Soviet media dubbed 'the oppressive capitalist society'. Newspaper headlines such as 'The proletarian writer in

freedom'. Hence his third reason: the need 'to develop, to learn, to master' his craft and the wish 'to get out from this god-forsaken hole to the wider arena' which Paris seemed to be. 'I was convinced that once I learn the language, I will be able to write in French', he concluded (see Jaworski 1995:149-150).

handcuffs' took the fullest possible advantage of the propagandistic value of his flight to 'the country of the world proletariat'.⁵

From the moment of his arrival, Jasieński was burdened with various social duties and activities, becoming an important literary as well as political figure. As a result, not only his artistic development suffered – he complained that he had no time for his creative work – but his personal life also fell apart. After giving birth to their son, Klara, who never seemed to share his literary passions (Dziarnowska 1982:149, 330) left him while Jasieński developed a relationship with Anna Berzin, wife of an important party official. Jasieński and Berzin were subsequently married. Details regarding Jasieński's personal life in Soviet Russia are very scant. Dziarnowska implies that his second marriage was troubled by Berzin's jealousy, especially since he continued to see his first wife because of their son, Andrey (ibid.:399-401). Even less is known about the writer's material situation, but we can assume that his living conditions were as difficult as those of most Russians after the collapse of the Soviet economy resulting from forced collectivisation. As one Polish writer remembers from visiting Jasieński in Moscow in December 1933, he

[...] was dressed in absolute trash, although it is certain that he put on his best clothes. He gave the impression of a man who lives in fear. His eyes were jumping from one thing to another [...]. Our conversation did not hang together [...]. The dishes, food and drinks were of a remarkably elegant, even theatrical, character. Someone, some people in charge, obviously made sure that we Polish writers remained convinced that men of letters in the Soviet Union had a good life – hence the caviar and crystal glasses. I could not resist the thought that the moment we left, someone would show up and immediately take away all that was left on the table; that this someone would pack up the dishes and silver, and then poverty and hunger would return to this flat. (Nowakowski quoted in Jaworski 1995:201)

Initially Jasieński hoped to work with the Poles living in the Soviet Union, but his relationship with Polish nationals turned out to be complex and difficult from the very beginning. As one commentator maintains, Jasieński soon became disenchanted with the

⁵ Comments on Jasieński's arrival in the Soviet Union, illustrated with photographs and quotations from the press, may be found in Jaworski (1995 :17-19); see also Dziarnowska 1982:247-258.

backwardness and limited education of his compatriots who often came from humble backgrounds. Their links with Poland had been broken for many years, their language was littered with Russianisms, while their political views were surprisingly inflexible (Sierocka:129-227).⁶ Jasieński himself confirms this in his 'Last testimony': 'To write in Polish for the questionable Polish "masses" indeed made no sense – these masses had much better command of the Russian than of the Polish language' (in Jaworski 1995:171). From the start Jasieński found himself caught in a vicious circle of mistrust, suspicion and accusation which required his constant vigilance. On several occasions he was forced to publish extensive notes of self-criticism – humiliating press releases acknowledging his ideological illiteracy.

Apart from the works discussed in this study, while in the Soviet Union Jasieński wrote two novels in the tradition of realism. The first one was the novel *Man Changes his Skin* (1932) set in Tadzhikistan, where a group of devoted Communist workers is involved in building an irrigation canal. The enthusiasm of the builders is bolstered by the belief that the canal will upgrade the backward, feudal lifestyle of people in the region of the Vakhsh river. Focusing on industrial progress in the country, the novel aims to show the role of industrialisation in bringing a profound social and ideological transformation of people's consciousness. Apart from describing the notorious Soviet shock-work system, the novel portrays a wide range of characters with varying degrees of devotion to the Communist construction system. Skilfully developed criminal intrigue together with captivating descriptions of local colour make the novel interesting and entertaining. Although hailed as an exemplary socialist realist work by Soviet scholars, the novel's merit lies in its failure strictly to implement the demands of socialist realism. The metaphoric title of the novel encourages scepticism by pointing out that for many, the 'transformation' was simply a superficial and expedient 'change of the skin'. The targeted beneficiaries of the project, mostly the local Tadzhiks, are shown to be apprehensive of pending changes. Nevertheless this book marks the climax of Jasieński's Soviet career.

⁶ K. Sierocka, *Polonia Radziecka 1917-1939*. Warszawa,1963.

The second novel *A Conspiracy of the Indifferent* did not appear in print until 1956 in three subsequent issues of the leading Soviet literary journal *Novy mir*, becoming the first of many reclaimed works to be published during the so-called 'thaw' after Stalin's death. As was the case with the works of so many other writers, this posthumous publication was tantamount to Jasieński's official rehabilitation.⁷ The edition was supplemented by Jasieński's widow Anna Berzin, who herself suffered seventeen long years of imprisonment in a *gulag*, persecuted as the wife of a so-called 'enemy of the people'. Jasieński had fallen victim to the sudden turn in Stalin's policy toward foreign nationals in the Soviet Union which took place at the beginning of the nineteen-thirties.⁸ The most frequent accusation directed at foreigners was espionage, sabotage or, as was the case with Jasieński, 'national-opportunism' and participation in anti-Soviet military organisations. In most cases the evidence was either fabricated or obtained by means of severe tortures as documented in a number of publications and witness-reports, including a recent collection of Jasieński's own testimonies published in Jaworski's book (1995).

Bruno Jasieński was arrested by the NKVD on 31 July 1937. Jaworski established that the charges against Jasieński were based on the following: all those who voted for Jasieński to become a member of the CPSU were found to be 'spies' and 'Trotskyists'; during his trip to Tadzhikistan Jasieński organised orgies and laughed at counter-revolutionary, anti-

⁷ Jasieński was the first writer who was rehabilitated after Stalin's death. As noted by Rogovin Frankel: 'The brief statement of Jasieński's wife about his fate was an early reference to the purges.' (*Novy Mir: A Case Study in the Politics of Literature 1952-1958*. Cambridge, 1981:90, 175).

⁸ The treatment of Poles is documented in Mikołaj Iwanow's study *Pierwszy naród ukarany: Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921-1939* (1991). Summarising the anti-Polish campaign, Iwanow writes: 'As Stalin's policy of Terror intensified, so did the view that a "Pole" and a "Communist" are entirely incompatible concepts. This eventually led to an atmosphere of intolerance towards Poles in the circles composed of the "people of regime", ending in a widespread campaign of "hunting" for Poles in Party circles as well as in other institutions of the totalitarian Soviet society' (359). Hysterical anti-Polish propaganda was promoted by the Soviet press under the banner of the 'imminent danger of the aggression of Polish Fascism on the first country of the world proletariat' and lampoons developing this theme appeared in the Soviet press daily (1991:358).

Semitic and indecent jokes; in 1920 he volunteered to the Polish army so, potentially, he could fight against the Soviet Union; the introduction to his novel *I Burn Paris* was written by a 'Fascist writer' (that is, Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski); Jasieński accepted the royalties from a 'Fascist' publisher; while in the Soviet Union, Jasieński propagated his views that it is 'impossible to develop Polish socialist culture in the Soviet Union'. Jasieński was also accused of making his Moscow flat available to the 'unmasked Polish spy' Wandurski and of maintaining contact with 'Trotskyists' and 'spies' such as Dąbal and Averbach. The Soviet authorities claimed also that he recommended 'Polish spies', the Szymkiewicz couple, when they applied for a Soviet visa. As Jaworski aptly observes, 'some of these accusations may seem ridiculous and absurd today, but at that time they were extremely serious, so serious that on these grounds Jasieński was accused of treason and expelled from the Party as early as the middle of May 1937 and soon afterwards removed from the managing body of the Union of Soviet Writers' (1995:46-47). In the meantime the persecution was extended to Jasieński's family. After the death of his former wife, Klara, their only son, Andrey, was sent to a children's home, where he remained until 1956. Jasieński's second wife, Anna Berzin, was arrested and exiled to the notorious 'Republic of Komi' in the Far East, where she remained until 1955. She died in Moscow in 1962 (*ibid.*:29).

According to recently recovered documents, examined by Krzysztof Jaworski, Bruno Jasieński was executed in Moscow on 17 September 1938 immediately after his sentencing. As established through the Russian (post-Soviet) organization 'Memorial' and its Polish counterpart 'Karta', Jasieński was buried in a common grave in Butov near Moscow along with dozens of other victims of the Great Terror (*ibid.*:54].

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